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New
Writings
in SF17

NEW WRITINGS IN SF17

Edited by

John
Carnell

Joseph Green

Ernest Hill

Michael G. Coney

Lee Harding

H. A. Hargreaves

R.W. Mackelworth

L. Davison

Edited by John Carnell

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NEW WRITINGS IN S-F

17

Edited by
JOHN CARNELL

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CONTENTS

Foreword by <i>John Carnell</i>	page 9
More Things in Heaven and Earth by <i>H. A. Hargreaves</i>	11
Aspect of Environment by <i>L. Davison</i>	67
Soul Survivors by <i>Lee Harding</i>	89
Death and the Sensperience Poet by <i>Joseph Green</i>	115
Two Rivers by <i>R. W. Mackelworth</i>	133
The Hero by <i>Ernest Hill</i>	159
The True Worth of Ruth Villiers by <i>Michael G. Coney</i>	169

To
NEIL ARMSTRONG
COL. EDWIN ALDRIN
COL. MICHAEL COLLINS
and the Apollo 11 Moon Landing
July 17-24, 1969

FOREWORD

by

JOHN CARNELL

"COLOUR—the new dimension in television viewing." So say the advertisements—and it really has to be seen to be believed—but it is not the run-of-the-mill programmes or the 'instant' news which have intrigued me so much during the past six months as the tremendous educational potential this new dimension has produced. Back in my early school days, history, geography and world affairs were somewhat dull subjects enlivened only by an occasional black and white lantern slide lecture. Now, in six months, I find that I have visually absorbed and consequently retained more information about British and European history through documentary and semi-documentary programmes than I have learned in half a lifetime of reading.

It is seeing the authenticity of costumes, customs, even locale in colour which makes the difference. Even such period pieces as "The Churchills," "The Six Wives of Henry VIII" and "The Borderers" are packed with informational side issues—decor, furniture, furnishings; items scarcely noticed in black and white. Small wonder, therefore, that today's children are educated almost from birth into a dynamically visual world. The gulf between their childhood world and mine is almost unbelievable! Where I saw the birth of the crystal wireless set and the dawn of commercial aviation, they are seeing world television and space-flight. Where I daydreamed of the possibilities inherent in science fiction ideas, they are *living* them!

It is the modern miracle of television, however, that Dr. H. A. Hargreaves takes as his central theme in the lead novelette in this volume. "More Things In Heaven And Earth" uses television as a mass educational medium, albeit on the highly intellectual level of Shakespearean theory, and

accurately portrays the immense advantages the coming generations will reap from this new method of teaching. Himself a teacher of English at the University of Alberta in Canada, Dr. Hargreaves has an acute perception of the values to be obtained from this method of tuition—although the main premise in his plot, that of ‘gestalt’ minds, has a far greater futuristic flavour about it.

Supporting stories in this volume range far and wide in the realm of fiction—three are concerned with our changing world and two of those specifically with the Welfare State. Ernest Hill’s vignette, “The Hero,” deals with Youth’s inhumanity to Old Age, a biting acidic exposé; while the equality depicted in Michael Coney’s “The True Worth Of Ruth Villers” is frightening in its potential nearness.

Away in the realms of spaceflight and life on other worlds, we can balance out today’s problems with the prospects of plenty of *lebensraum* with only alien environments to fight, although the three stories published here—by Joseph Green, R. W. Mackelworth and new author L. Davison—fail to come up with any happy solutions. Purely coincidental, of course; it is the duty of science fiction writers to look at all our problems and warn against the obvious defects. Life isn’t all sweetness and life, even though it is exciting most of the time.

January 1970

JOHN CARNELL

MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH

by

H. A. HARGREAVES

Soon, with the mass media of television, we may see Shakespeare analysed in depth as part of a Drama course. But electronics can play some strange tricks; it might co-ordinate a whole where before were only separate parts.

MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH

'There are more things in heaven and earth,
Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'
Hamlet

ONE

HE woke, as always, easily and instantly alert, feeling a well-being that brought him off the bed with lithe grace, facing the curtained window wall. Thumbing the switch at the end of a long, slow stretch, he watched as the curtains parted and slid into their receptacles, revealing a sweeping view of the Great Plains. He stepped forward and touched the faintly visible seam of the window, then breathed deeply as he moved through the opening on to his balcony. Before him was an unbroken mass of protected parkland; off to the extreme right the perimeter of that imposing complex of modern architecture—University Television Central. Consciously appreciating the day, he went through the routine of setting-up exercises, allowing his body to savour the sensuous pleasure of hard work. That done, he stripped off his sleepsuit, showered and dressed, dialled breakfast and a newsfax, retrieved his All Purpose Card, and reviewed the schedule for the day.

Alan Hamilton, Senior Lecturer, accepted his position of eminence in the academic world much as he had every other upward step in his career; neither with smugness nor humility, but the simple and complete satisfaction of knowing that he was where he best fitted at his stage of development. He knew vaguely that he was envied by many people, even disliked or misunderstood by some of his lesser colleagues, but he was thoroughly engrossed by the work he did superlatively well. On the rare occasion when he was forced to comment on his success, he gave a large measure

of the credit, and quite properly, to The Unit, the group of talented people whom he had painstakingly assembled around him, and who were essential to the preparation of his course material. They too were the envy of the whole profession, and their unique fusion as a production team sometimes prompted less talented people to hint at a dark, and totally fictitious, incestuous relationship within the group.

He was, however, unconscious of one fact; that it was an element of his own personality which was largely responsible for the cohesion of The Unit, and its ease of making tangible the complex interpretations which he derived from the plays of Shakespeare. This was the same element which enabled him to communicate so readily by means of television ideas which clearly, in written form, had fewer dimensions than those projected to his students spread through the mid-third of the continent. Projection was probably the word which defined that element best; a rare gift that only the truly great teachers and performers have possessed.

Breakfast finished, and the news as boringly full of discontent and clashes as always, Hamilton decided to skip the pedexpress, and instead chose the high-level walkway, where he could still enjoy the fine weather and mull over some tenuous thoughts about the day's lecture on *Richard III*. There were one or two minor suggestions that he would make to The Unit, possibilities which they hadn't covered in the previous two days of discussion, experimentation, and rehearsal. There was, for example, a slight change of inflection in Richard's "As I am subtle, false, and treacherous", which could better de-emphasise the modern psychological interpretation of Richard. He would call it to Ben Bowman's attention. Ben would like it, being more inclined to the Machiavellian interpretation—not that he gave any less effort to the psychological when it was required, as it invariably was by the students. One by one, he clarified his ideas until he arrived below the peak of BC, the broadcast control tower which had been intended as *avant garde* but had somehow wound up looking like a reconstructed pyramid.

Once inside the buildings, Hamilton moved swiftly through the maze of corridors, plummeted into the depths on an express elevator, and turned in at the broadcast production area. Mind still on his lecture, he was startled when, from the open door next to his own, a deep voice called, "Alan! Can you spare a moment?" Sam Meynard, executive producer of the Shakespeare course, half-rose from his desk and motioned. "I know it's a damned imposition so close to lecture time," he rumbled, "but someone upstairs has a real squeeze on this time. Sit down for just a second and I'll give you the score." Alan propped restlessly against a low file deck, and Sam rapidly filled in the problem.

"You know, of course, that for the third year running we've topped both the faculty and student rating lists in the *AAUB Bulletin*. The summer issue has been out for two days now, in case you haven't seen it, and we're miles ahead of anyone else." Sam allowed himself a fleeting smile. "We shouldn't have any complaints about that, but here's the sticker. *Look at Life* must have got an advance copy, because they're after us again to do an on-location article. This time they won't let us off. They're desperate to stay alive and we're hot material."

"Isn't there anything you can do to keep them out of our hair?" Alan asked. They had managed to avoid this twice now, but he had already realised that The Unit would have to submit to the external and internal pressure some day.

"Look, Alan," Sam said patiently, "I've used every excuse and delaying tactic I could scheme up, but there's tremendous pressure now. We've been over the reasons for opening up to public view, and our own reasons for privacy. Now add the fact that at least two people upstairs are suddenly running scared, and willing to cut our throats to get the magafax in here. We have to give in this time."

Alan slouched silently for a moment, then shrugged. The producer was a fiercely competitive man, but his administrative skill, coupled with intense loyalty to his subordinates, ensured that he would know and accept the time when to resist would hurt them more than to submit. The pressure from the public had been steadily growing. They

had only been adjusting to the tremendous impact of EVR and home video education, with its attendant costs and staggering change in living patterns, when the next great revolution in education, Tri-Vid, had revitalized, reshaped, and linked the universities and colleges into three great grids. Everybody knew its power, everybody felt the bite, everybody heard students and faculty rave over it, and damned few taxpayers had ever experienced Tri-Vid. The public had a right to be curious; even uneasy and resentful. Alan knew, too, that since the two tottering giants had merged into one magafax, the political power of *Look at Life* had become awesome. If Sam was giving in, then they must really have turned the screws.

"All right," he said. "But I want absolutely silent observation during production. Even in the booth, no questions until after everyone leaves the set." He spoke from hard experience. For some reason they hadn't been able to determine, even during the early days, a visitor anywhere near the set reduced their efficiency. Sam knew it, though he had no real sense of the "dampening" effect The Unit had felt.

"Alan," Sam promised, "I'll do everything I can to make it as remote as possible. When would I ever willingly tamper with an artist's psyche?" And he grinned like a slightly overweight Satan. "Seriously," he continued, "I'll guarantee you two weeks more, but you'd all better start adjusting to the situation, because that's the limit. Sorry to have interrupted you during prime time, but I have a meeting in Toronto this afternoon. The U. of T. may finally allow the rest of the central-continent grid to join its private network." On that half-humorous note he waved a large hand, and Alan left as the older man dipped into the pile of papers on his desk.

There were papers on Alan's desk too, but he ignored them as he eased his chair to half-recline and closed his eyes. He could visualise his notes readily, and he reviewed them briefly, anticipating the elaboration from point form as he worked the vast student-teacher audience into discussion. When the musical tone sounded he was still mulling over details, and it was with a faint uneasiness that he left his office and strode down to the studio bays.

On set, Alan found the usual state of seeming confusion which, to the experienced eye, meant that everything was working up to the proper fusion for broadcast time. Without cue, and apparently without breaking off their separate activities, The Unit gathered about him for their customary briefing. There were no walk-ons or supers today, but around and above them moved the many technical staff involved with last-minute details. Quickly, incisively, Alan sketched out his new thoughts, while the rest listened attentively, questioning this, adding an idea to that, incorporating everything into the three or four general patterns of interpretation they would follow.

Hunched over in a canvas chair, Ben Bowman scowled ferociously and tested the new inflection in Richard's opening soliloquy. "It's deep, dark, and bloody," he mused, "and certainly suggests the Old Vice or Machiavellian. I like it." He rose and shrugged his hump into place, then limped over to Sylvia Waltham, who stood gracefully listening, toying absently with a solitaire. "Sweet saint, for charity, be not so curst," he leered, then shambled off for some touches to his makeup.

Sylvia smiled, slipped off her ring, and dropped it into Alan's pocket as she gave him a swift kiss on the cheek and whispered, "Dinner tonight, not overtime." Alan watched her fondly as she glided off into the semi-gloom, admiring for a split second the sheer beauty of his fiancée. Immediately, however, he was drawn back to business, as Nick Ruzzuto drew him to one side with an air of deep concern.

"I didn't want to mention it while the rest were being briefed," Nick said, "but someone's been tampering with the equipment."

Alan was jolted by the co-ordinator's words. "You're sure?" he asked, even as he realised with a sinking sensation that the question was unnecessary. Nick was a rarity, a brilliant technician who also understood both dramatic literature and stagecraft. He was not only The Unit's camera co-ordinator but doubled as director while Alan was in the booth. Quietly, but surely, he sketched out what had happened.

"Merle called me early this morning," he said, "to tell me about a dream she had last night. She had been arguing with herself over whether it was better to toss it off or to tell someone, but she couldn't forget it. She woke Ben and the two of them lay there and discussed it. As Ben says, you know how uncannily prophetic Merle's dreams can be, so he made her call me. It seems she was in one of those sequences where she could see herself acting. But this time she looked fuzzy—couldn't get focused—and she kept trying to adjust something, as if she were watching on video, while she got absolutely desperate. Well, she apologised for getting me up early, and I went back to bed. Still, knowing Merle, I figured it wouldn't hurt to come in a little ahead of time and see what I could find." He stopped, and Alan nodded approval.

"I couldn't locate any trouble on a visual check," Nick continued, "but I felt uneasy all the same. So I sat for a while looking at the set. I'd turned up the new lighting and it seemed perfect. As a sort of extra, I decided to monitor it for viewing. I flipped up the cameras, and there it was." He paused, and Alan stirred impatiently. "Bank number two of tricons was off sync. Fuzzy as hell. And I couldn't get a proper adjustment. I had to reset all three cameras, and they had been deliberately tampered with."

Alan turned and surveyed the great bay slowly, carefully. "Do you have any idea at all who it was?" he asked.

Nick looked up into the flies reflectively, strong fingers of one hand kneading the other closed fist. "Whoever it was," he answered, "knew exactly what he was doing. It's a factory setting that was changed—one that only a first-class technician would think of, or understand. We've only two on our crew, and I'll vouch for both of them."

"Sabotage!" Alan breathed reluctantly. "It has to be someone from outside. But why?"

Nick thrust his hands into his pockets and leaned against a light standard. "Could be lots of reasons," he grunted. "I imagine you can think of more than I can. Meanwhile, we've got work to do. We'd better knock heads about it after the session. How about your office?" Alan nodded and set out pensively for the booth, trying to set this new, dis-

turbing complication to one side so that he could concentrate on the broadcast, now only minutes away.

As the door to the booth swung noiselessly shut, Alan made a final effort to get back on track, to think only of his lecture. He noted that the grips had installed his shelves without disturbing the order of his books. Unlike many of his colleagues, he occasionally used this carefully-selected library during lectures, though they also provided the appearance of a study on the three sides presented to the cameras. Most often, however, he used the scanner mounted under the left side of his desk, connected to the vast computerised microfilm library elsewhere in the complex.

As he seated himself in the simulated "armchair" the bank of lights atilt in his desktop suddenly blinked on—two hundred tiny green lights and thermal switches, each representing a three-hundred-student classroom somewhere in the central third of the North American continent. Below them was a smaller panel of switches by which he could provide any number of viewing combinations.

His eyes swept the six monitor cubicles just above eye level, showing his own image, the set, a special-effects model of Shakespeare's Globe theatre, and two random-choice classrooms which appeared as two appropriate lights turned red. The master monitor also held his image, and he straightened his tunic to watch the images respond. He picked up the miniscule, transparent throat mike and earphone, to hear the chief technician checking out all personnel. A few words to test the sound hookup, some subvocal comments to The Unit, and he was ready. The Globe appeared on the master monitor, doors opening, while a voice introduction overrode Elizabethan fanfare, and then he was on camera.

Immediately unaware of anything else, Alan deftly picked up the threads of discussion from the previous, first lecture of the semester, integrated leftover questions, and began working into the remaining lecture on *Richard III*. They had covered theme and structure already, and now he was leading quite naturally through the ironic reversals in every element of the play, into the character of Richard

himself. As he outlined the similarities of Richard and the Marlovian hero, one of the green lights began to blink, and with casual gesture Alan touched it while he talked. It turned red, and on monitor five an earnest, clean-shaven student appeared, leaning forward in his chair. Alan switched him to broadcast and he asked a pertinent question about Richard's many-sided personality. Switching again, Alan split the image and joined his student. In the viewing cubicles of the classrooms, full-sized and in three dimensions, they would seem real enough to touch, sitting almost facing one another to discuss the problem.

It was clear that this student favoured the psychological approach to the character, and when Alan caught several other lights blinking he was relieved to bring another student into confrontation with the young man. By good fortune, this one was full of information on the cycle-play Vice figure, and Alan was pleased to let them hammer out their theories for a few minutes. Choosing the most opportune time, he tactfully suggested that they watch how their ideas worked out in practice, and the two students' images faded to be replaced by that of Ben Bowman, now every inch the complex Duke of Gloucester. Ben went through the opening soliloquy twice, revealing the truth, and the limitations, of each interpretation. No other light blinked, and Alan continued, carrying the discussion into the area of Richard's powers of persuasion.

It was easy enough to work interplay now, with the students enthusiastic and participating fully, and they moved, as planned, through the usual clear arguments about Anne's acquiescence to Richard in Act I, scene ii, to proofs in the acting of Ben and Sylvia. This time they were called on to provide first a spirited Anne versus an overpowering Richard, and then an Anne weakened by grief and fatigue, crumbling under Richard's incredible wooing. It seemed clear that the first was the better interpretation, and this brought up the inevitable question of the parallel wooing scene in Act IV, where ex-queen Elizabeth is asked by Richard to persuade her daughter into marriage. One student was quick to quote Richard's assessment of the ex-queen: "Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman," as

she apparently gives in and leaves. He in turn was challenged by another student who quoted Stanley, in scene v, who tells Richard's enemy, Richmond, by a messenger: "... the Queen hath heartily consented/He should espouse Elizabeth her daughter."

The issue was rapidly narrowed to two interpretations. In the first, Richard would now have lost his powers of persuasion, and the Queen cleverly dissembled till she could escape. In the second, Richard would have retained his ability, and the fickle Queen been swayed again after she left him. Ben and his wife Merle had gone through both interpretations when, suddenly, Alan found himself saying, "Isn't there a third possibility here? The Queen has lost husband and both sons. Couldn't she be weakened by grief, like Anne?" He could feel the consternation on set, even as he himself wondered what had possessed him to ask the question. They had never discussed this alternative, and to provide it meant backtracking to the beginning of the scene where Queen Elizabeth, Queen Margaret, and the Duchess of York lament together.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Merle appear, with Olga Brandt as Margaret, and Sylvia with a cloak thrown over her costume to play the Duchess. The Unit worked it through, and admittedly it was not an unreasonable possibility, but it put the final touch to a morning full of unpleasant shocks for Alan. He made an effort to pull himself together and managed to finish off the lecture, concentrating on most of the uncovered material and holding discussion to a minimum. As the monitors went dead he sank back limply and pushed a hand through his hair, surely more grey at the temples, he thought with a grimace. He had been upset by all the intrusions and complications, but was that the real reason for his strange behaviour? The more he considered it, the less certain he was that the idea he had voiced was—could possibly be—his own.

Two

THE view was particularly fine this evening, Alan admitted reluctantly. The full, strong moon rode just beyond a school

of small, puffball clouds, lighting the gently rolling landscape westward, it seemed, to the very horizon. From the lofty terrace where he and Sylvia sat, the unbroken sweep was breathtaking, almost like an illusion created from an old travel film. Behind them there was only a faint murmur of sound from "Central's" dinner club, yet it was enough to remind Alan of all that had occurred during the day; enough to make him begrudge his admission about the weather to Sylvia. She hadn't yet asked about the morning's broadcast, but he knew she was disturbed and curious. There was just the trace of a line of concern at the corners of her deep violet eyes, and though her chatter was light and humorous, her hand moved too often under her long, jet-black hair to push it back off her shoulder. With a shrug and a half-sigh, he decided it would be as well to straighten out his own thoughts by talking them over.

"You know," he said, groping for his words, "how things sometimes seem to pop up in your mind, and you find yourself saying them as if they'd been there all the time?"

Sylvia nodded, and added. "Yes. It's as if they'd been set out back someplace, getting a part here, a screw tightened there, until, when they're ready, they get thrust out into the middle of everything else." Her lips smiled, but her eyes didn't. "What happened this morning: it wasn't like that, though, was it? And it wasn't like the ideas that we give to one another without talking either. I always hear you say things like that as if they weren't quite—unfamiliar to me." She brushed the knuckles of his hand with a fingertip. "This morning was a shock to me—to all of us."

Alan sat back and relaxed a little, obviously relieved. "I felt quite guilty about it, even while I was talking. I've never pulled anything like that on The Unit." Then he straightened up again. "But you know, I can't explain how it happened, to myself or to you. It felt almost like your finger on my knuckles, or a feather tickling the inside of my head."

"Don't fret too much over it, Alan," Sylvia said earnestly. "Chances are it won't happen again, and if it does—well, we handled it today." She placed her hand over his. "The

rest know you too well to think you would trick them or press them without thinking."

Alan answered intensely. "We're all too close for misunderstanding, I know, but the fact is that I did push them. And what's worse, is not having the foggiest notion of how it happened, I can't guarantee that it will never happen again." He leaned forward and said, more quietly yet, "Besides, other things have come piling on, one of them bothersome enough, but to be expected, the other one unexpected and—kind of dirty." And as Sylvia listened silently, a frown growing, he traced over the conversation with Sam about *Look at Life's* pressure for an article, and Nick's experience with the doctored tricons. "I put off the meeting with Nick," he finished, "because I want Sam to hear it too, tomorrow. Then the three of us can decide on the best action to take." He looked ruefully over their half-eaten meal as a waiter unobtrusively poured wine, then dropped his AP Card on the tray and spun his glass thoughtfully between thumb and forefinger. He was about to speak again when, at a warning glance from Sylvia, he looked up and saw Don Scanlin, another Senior Lecturer, approaching.

Scanlin, waving a limp hand, dropped loosely into a chair and crossed his long legs restlessly. "Hi, people," he smiled. "Just a week into the semester, and already we're so buried that we hardly meet." He drummed lean fingers on the table. "Why so glum? You haven't been having a lover's spat, have you? Don't call it off or I'll lose my credit in the pool. I've got five on you for an early June wedding."

Sylvia looked somewhat annoyed as she answered, "Really, Don. If there is such a distasteful thing as a pool, I should think people would have better places to put their credits."

Don gave her a broad grin, face wrinkling all the way to his receding hairline. The effect was somewhat startling, since everything seemed to warm except his light grey eyes. "Well," he drawled, "you know what a hothouse atmosphere this is. Can't keep anything to yourself for long. Incidentally," he turned to Alan, "the latest is that something went a little hairy in your studio this morning. I thought

that nothing could faze The Unit." There was an almost concealed note of envy in the statement.

Alan felt a sudden touch of ice at the base of his ribs, but there was no outward sign of it as he held his wine to the light and squinted through it. "We had a mild panic," he said. "My fault entirely. I didn't stick to the standard variants. But The Unit came through like the old US Cavalry and saved me from getting scalped."

Sylvia laughed, as Don looked slightly puzzled. "Perhaps it was a good thing, happening so early in the year," she said. "We might have been getting just a little too cocky, too smug. Why, I wouldn't have put it past Alan to engineer something like this just to sharpen us up, though I believe him," she hastily added, "when he says it really was a slip."

Don shifted uneasily in his chair. "Yes," he muttered. "I'm not so sure he didn't plan it, myself." He grinned again, less warmly, as he recrossed his legs. "No such problem in my area," he said briskly. "If you fluff an EVR, you just go back and retape it. I've spent a lot of hours on a single lesson. After all, I can't do less than my best for those thousands of home viewers—one hundred and eighty thousand, I think, this year." There was a hard sound of satisfaction in the last.

Alan did a swift review and said, "That's up over last year, isn't it? And you had a great rating on the Level Two Shakespeare course."

Don flushed slightly. "Yes," he answered. "Somebody out there likes me." The emphasis wasn't lost on Sylvia and Alan, who knew well enough that in the profession Level Three work such as theirs had a greater, if unwarranted, prestige. Don rose, and straightened his gaunt frame. "Time to get back," he noted, somewhat sourly. "I've got two graduate students moving in next week, and my wife insists that we're having a party that weekend. Late hours for me."

Alan and Sylvia rose too, as Alan pulled a long face. "That's food for indigestion," he said. "My students aren't due for a while yet, but I've got some thesis drafts sitting on the desk already." Don waved again and ambled off, while

the waiter appeared and returned Alan's card. Together, he and Sylvia made their way silently to Alan's quarters across the complex, both pensive and subdued now.

It was Sylvia who broached the matter that was troubling them, when they had settled for a brief nightcap. "Do you think," she asked, "that he was asking about the flurry over your slip?"

Alan shrugged noncommittally. "I couldn't tell," he answered. "The first thought that came to me, though, was the tricon tampering. I just don't know what he was after."

Sylvia moved closer and slid his arm over her shoulder. "Perhaps it's unjust, but I don't really trust him," she said, looking uncomfortable. "No. It would be better to say I don't trust his wife. She's so ambitious for him." She moved Alan's hand down a little. "Are we invited to this party?" she asked.

Alan took a last sip of his drink and said thoughtfully, "I expect we will be. It would be politic to invite us. And it would be doubly politic to go," he added. "And now," he tried to copy Ben's best leer, "since there's a lot to do tomorrow, suppose we just relax for what's left of the evening." There was no more conversation.

Next morning Alan rose even earlier than usual. He carried breakfast to his desk and began an intense review of *Richard II* in preparation for the Saturday morning conference with The Unit. This time he didn't want any unexpected interpretations, and he cross-checked a number of the standard editions of his own ultramicrofiche cards, even dialling the library once or twice for a look at recent articles on microfilm. Before leaving, he phoned and made a late-morning appointment with Nick and Sam, then hastily put his notes together and made for the pedexpress. He was still figuring blocking for some key scenes as he entered BC and dropped to the studio area. It would be a very busy day.

The Unit seemed more amused by the events of the past day than anything else, Alan found to his relief—at least until he told them, in confidence, about the mechanical mischief that Nick had uncovered. Olga had laughingly

tossed her thick braids and preened over getting some extra "tube time", but later, Alan noticed, she sought out Nick during a break and, together with Merle, talked very seriously with him. Paul Jacobs, the last of the "secret seven", as they sometimes humorously called themselves, hadn't even been on set the day previously, and he clearly was upset as he listened to a summary by Ben Bowman. Then, as they got deep into the day's work, the whole matter seemed to have been forgotten.

Paul and Ben were working up a fine contrast as Bolingbroke and Richard II, respectively; Paul using a strong, cold, businesslike manner, and Ben a soft, almost effeminate, musical voice and overly graceful gestures. Blocking went smoothly, almost entirely controlled by Nick, showing his superb sense of action focus; dialogue patterns were tested and built in corners; discussions surfaced everywhere now and then—in short, it looked like the usual seeming chaos of a perfect rehearsal. Only The Unit itself would have been aware that there was a fraction of attention elsewhere; that now there was hardly a second when someone of the group wasn't keeping the rest of the set under watch.

How like them, Alan thought, simply to evolve it like that, without pre-arrangement, and he found suddenly that he had been terrifically tense for the last hour or so. Now he felt that everyone had taken a share of his anxiety and dissipated it.

It was the same in Sam's office, later on, when Nick and Alan filled him in on what had happened. Sam was incredulous in the first instant, and in the next he had accepted the facts and was ready to work out some strategy.

"There are two directions we can move in, it seems to me," he said crisply as he drew a line down a sheet of paper. "Nick, you can check back to see who's been temporary on your crew for the last year, and who might have been permanent even before that. In addition, you can pass the word to those you trust, and tighten up set-checks during and after rehearsal. Bring a few crew on early before broadcast, and use a fine-tooth comb on the equipment. It's a pity we can't give you the set entirely for yourselves, but we have to keep the afternoon and evening courses booked

in." He finished jotting his remarks in the first column.

"I'll do some quiet looking and talking upstairs," he continued. "I can check crew for the other two courses as well, and I'll see if I can't get a little extra security without making it too obvious. As for the changes during broadcast, well, you'll have to look after that yourself, Alan."

As the others got up to leave, he stood up and said, "Oh, there's something further you'd better know now. I'm not sure it has anything at all to do with this, but someone is trying very hard to move me off the course, and into liaison with The University of Toronto. It might have been flattering under other circumstances, but now I'd better look at the apple and see if there's a worm in it." He placed a hand on Alan and Nick's shoulders as they left the office. "Meanwhile, think Iago rather than Othello, eh?" He closed the door with a grim chuckle.

The rest of the day was uneventful, and Alan finished work a little earlier than usual. He and Sylvia spent the evening pleasantly enough with the Bowmans, where, by common consent, none of them spoke of the problems facing them. Bidding was brisk, the play was sharp, and they went through seven rubbers of bridge to end with a difference of only fifty points. The change of mental pace seemed like a tonic, and Sunday Alan and Sylvia spent the entire day picnicking off in the forest belt, drinking in the beauty and the brisk fall air as if to store them up for the whole winter.

On Monday everything went off like clockwork, and by broadcast time on Tuesday they were all beginning to wonder if they'd been too panicky about last Friday's events.

In the booth, Alan felt he was really peaked for his lecture. Checkout had gone smoothly, all equipment was functioning perfectly, he had worked through the introductory material and was discussing the conflicting opinions on the unevenness of *Richard II*. He had provoked strong class reaction to the view that Shakespeare was experimenting with the portrayal of two social orders in the play, and The Unit had demonstrated, admirably, the two kinds of poetry and action. Ben was a beautifully weak Richard, last of a

declining line of medieval kings, and Paul was a dynamic Henry, the epitome of the renaissance man.

A student was on now, asking about Henry's apparently inconsistent use of the old-style rhetoric in Act V, scene iii, and Alan, anticipating a close look at the text, thumbed his microfilm scanner. Nothing happened. Throwing a glance to the monitor, he tried again. Same result. The student had now finished his question and was looking expectant, and no lights blinked. Without waiting, Alan put himself on, and with a casual motion reached across to one of his shelves, plucking down a copy of *Richard II*.

Playing it for effect, he opened to the scene and smoothed down the page with a caressing hand. It was partly from a genuine love, and partly because he knew the regard these students had for real books. Instead of calling on Paul, he read himself, throwing into it the exaggerated style which a sarcastic Henry would use in dealing with his elderly aunt and uncle. He could see, through the narrow glass across the front of his booth, the reaction of The Unit, Merle kissing her hand to him and curtsying, Paul with a head-back laugh and fists on his hips. It went ideally, and the moment was past. "Out of the woods again," he thought, as he switched to another student, and they were off on a new track. The imagery of grief came now, and without forcing.

It was a fine class this year, if the first few lectures were any indication. They reached out after material on the barest hint. He answered, piecing together a number of lines, and using The Unit for a few more spot illustrations. That ought to do it. And then, with a shock that pinned him to his chair, he heard what was surely his own voice, asking—"Yet, can we take all this talk of grief imagery seriously when the Queen speaks of it as she does in Act II, scene ii? The beginning seems all right, but what about the end?"

It couldn't have been worse, was his first thought. Every producer cuts those lines, simply because no actress wants to tangle with them. On the set, six faces stared up at him in stunned amazement. Then Sylvia moved quickly to Nick and picked up the master text. Sitting in the massive throne, she opened the huge book, found the page, and

nodded. Alan switched her in as she appeared in monitor 2, a pathetic, almost ridiculous figure, dwarfed by book and throne. Ben gave the cue, off-camera: "'Tis nothing but conceit, my gracious lady," and Sylvia read in a small, slightly pitiful voice:

*'Tis nothing less: conceit is still derived
From some forefather grief; mine is not so,
For nothing hath begot my something grief;
Or something hath the nothing that I grieve:
'Tis in reversion that I do possess;
But what it is, that is not yet known; what
I cannot name; 'tis nameless woe, I wot.*

It was more than adequate—it was very good. Nevertheless, it was absolutely clear that while the grief imagery in the play wouldn't be harmed by the lines, they were a poetic blunder on Shakespeare's part. The students were facing their first real proof that the young Shakespeare could write a few bad lines.

Picking up that idea, Alan finished the last few minutes of the lecture by extemporising, even reading one or two other tortured conceits and "flat" lines. When the monitors went dead, he wiped cold sweat from his forehead and walked shakily down on to the set. He stood looking at The Unit, who all had a pinched, frightened appearance.

It was Merle who spoke first. "Alan, I'd say twice was too much, but—that wasn't you. I mean, that was you, and it wasn't. Oh, I don't know quite what I mean."

Paul followed her. "I heard you just as clearly as anyone else, Alan. A little mechanical, maybe, as if you had a sore jaw. But what bothers me is that I had just moved off to arrange my ruff. I didn't have my earphone in, Alan."

THREE

THE rest of the studio was dark now, save for a pool of light just inside the double doors, under which one of Nick's technicians had moved a tricon dolly to "make some adjustments". No one would enter unobserved. The Unit came together at the back of the set. It had been a minor

anticlimax when Nick and Alan examined the scanner in the booth, to find that the power supply module had been pulled just far enough to break contact. Their real problem was to explain the strange voice which had once again threatened to disrupt their broadcast. They were all agreed now that Alan hadn't actually spoken the words that they, and the network apparently, had heard. "I'm fairly certain," Alan was saying, "that the first time I did speak. This time, no! I didn't even sub-voc, yet it went to you all. For me that rules out any kind of electronic feed-in. What do you say, Nick?"

Nick threw up his hands. "I've heard of projectors that could do the job in a limited space like the studio—even into the booth. But it went network too. That would mean too complicated a setup to be concealed. It's nothing that I could explain in terms of existing equipment, under these circumstances."

There was a painful silence, until Paul cleared his throat self-consciously. "Look," he said, "I'm the one who heard it without my phone, and I've been trying to remember exactly what the sensation was. You can call the mindpatchers if you want, but I'm convinced that I didn't even hear it in the usual sense. It was inside, like mothwings against my brain."

There was a stir through the group, and he burst out defensively: "Come on. Some of us have volunteered for the psi-fi boys, and we know they've uncovered some pretty weird things. You, Nick! You can box the compass spinning on your head at the bottom of a well. Merle! How many of your dreams turn out to be wrong? Alan! Why haven't you let them run tests on you? You radiate like an emotion furnace. We can all tell when you're happy, excited, angry, or concentrating, from as far away as your office." He folded his arms and scowled. "If it isn't psi, then we're all crazy."

Olga dropped Nick's hand and stood up. "No one's disagreeing, Paul," she said quietly. "At least I'm not. Maybe we just don't want to accept it unless there's no other explanation."

The others murmured assent, and Ben spoke up. "As long

as I wasn't the first to bring it up, I'll climb on your wagon. That voice was a near-perfect imitation, but it wasn't Alan. Yet it was more a lack of proper inflection than wrong voice quality. I don't know of an impersonator alive who would duplicate a voice that way. The closest I've heard was a tape of faked confessions in the East-West Non-War Archives. They had spliced thousands of single words to make statements."

He shifted uneasily and Sylvia continued. "Nick has already ruled out anything like that. I agree that it wasn't Alan speaking, or even thinking, for that matter. He doesn't put thoughts together like that." She smiled encouragement at Paul. "So that leaves Paul's theory. And now, what do we do about it?"

Alan waited for a moment, until it was clear that no one was about to add anything or make a suggestion. "From my own experience with this 'voice' or whatever we call it, I'd be inclined to agree that it couldn't have been gadgetry. You know that I don't discount psi, but I haven't gone overboard for it either. Still, since I can't find any reasonable theory other than Paul's—let's assume that it is some kind of telepathy." He looked up as Sam slipped in at the far end of the studio, waited until he had moved up on to the set, and continued. "Number one. If it's a telepath, then I'll guarantee that no matter how the interference works it's a student somewhere in the network. The questions or suggestions are thoughtful and sincere; exactly what you would expect from a student who's really interested but hasn't got a broad background. Number two. It almost certainly couldn't be anyone in Television Central. For one thing, if it were tied up with the sabotage that's going on, it would have had a technical basis. For another, if it were anyone on the academic end, he would know too much for that kind of question to occur to him." Sam looked rather quizzical, but he seemed to have caught the significance of Alan's comments.

"All right, then," Alan stated flatly, "we have a telepathic student, out there anywhere in a five or six hundred mile radius. One of sixty thousand. How do we locate that student? And what do we work out to prevent chaos while

we're looking?" He watched while The Unit mulled it over, talking quietly. Sam leaned impassively against a flat, obviously biding his time until all the pieces fell into place.

Finally Ben straightened up from alongside Merle and said: "Paul mentioned the psi people and *their* tests. Doesn't the Basic Graduate Entrance Battery have a set of Psychological exams in it?" He glanced at Sam. "Why couldn't we get the Big Brain to run a search on the students enrolled in our course? A check for latent psi possibilities?"

Sam stroked his chin thoughtfully. "You've been away from teaching for a long time, Ben," he answered. "I'll give it a try, but I don't think the exams are designed to reveal that sort of thing. There's another possibility though." He thrust his hands into his tunic pockets. "If there's anything like that in records, it would be in the continental computer banks. Lord knows how deep it goes when it takes the initial personality pattern at birth. There hasn't been a pirate scanner built yet that can read the whole imprint off an AP Card." He turned to Alan as he wiped sweat off his palms. "Let me look into both areas and see what can be done. Telepath, yet," he muttered. "Next you'll be creating a Phantom of BC. I gather that your mysterious marvel has struck again." He held up a hand as Alan turned. "Don't tell me now," he said. "Let me get started on my hunt for the proverbial needle. Come up to the office when you've figured out how to keep your lectures to yourselves." With that, he strode off.

The set seemed abnormally quiet after Sam had left. Then Sylvia spoke up. "Alan," she asked, "is it possible for you to override this voice somehow? I mean, suppose you tried to speak yourself while it was speaking?"

Alan shook his head. "No," he answered, "I don't know whether I could or not, and it would certainly make for confusion all around. Who could tell which was me—and what would I say? It would be better to have nothing at all." He snapped his fingers and swung around. "Maybe that's it. Nick, is it possible for us to cut the audio when that voice comes on? It seems to operate through me, somehow, and feed into the network. Or better still, could

you cut out the booth just for that length of time? Wire in a switch for me? Wipe off the video too. Complete isolation at a touch."

Nick nodded assent. "It would take only a few patches," he said. "I think you'd better have control yourself, too. Of course, we'll catch hell for it, you know, if we blank the channel for more than a half-second. But I guess that would be better than complete ruin."

The rest of The Unit looked relieved, and Alan checked them with a gesture. "Remember," he warned them, "that this is only a temporary measure. The next time that voice butts in, I want every one of you concentrating on it. Anything we can find out about it, or any way we can use to stop it, that's what we all need to look for." Somewhat chastened, they broke up the meeting and wandered off in their separate ways.

The next two days went normally, save for the extra tension which was almost tangible on set during rehearsals. Alan's switch was installed immediately and tested. Nick cued in an automatic tape run of The Globe to cover with, and they decided it would serve if it was necessary. Meanwhile, Sam had gone digging, and had a fair amount of information when he, Alan, and Nick met in his office late Thursday afternoon.

"First," he opened, "the matter of student records. As I thought, there isn't anything in the Entrance Exams which would help us at all. They were designed to discover study patterns and potential problems in students who might need special help. Counselling says anything else uncovered is inviolable, and concerns abnormalities in social adjustment. A psi may well be maladjusted, but it would still require too much personal contact to check such cases out." He picked up another official memo. "Second, the continental computer people say we'd need a writ from the International Court to get anything other than credit or task proficiency ratings. Even the Americanadian Government has limited access." He leaned back and put his hands behind his head. "Third, I've picked up a few scraps that point towards one individual behind the sabotage. Nothing definite to go on, just who's been pally with who lately, and

hints of dissatisfaction with present assignments. I may find out a bit more on Saturday night, when I'm forced to socialise for a change." His lips pursed distastefully on the last. Sam didn't like big parties.

Alan smiled as a sudden thought struck him. "You've been invited to the Scanlins' party too."

Sam's eyes narrowed as he said, "Yes. Call it overtime. If you're going, be discreet but keep looking and listening." Alan felt a prickling at the back of his neck remembering what he and Sylvia had said. As he met Sam's eyes, he knew who Sam was talking about.

Nick cleared his throat. "Have fun, you people. I'm just hired help, so I don't rate an invitation." He grinned. "Guess I'll just have to struggle through a quiet evening with an old friend."

Alan grinned back. "Tell Olga that there's a fine concert on at Regional Arts."

"Seriously," Nick said, "I've checked out the technical staff, and there are only two possibilities among them. One has only been with us for this semester, and the other has been gone from our set for six months. The first one should have had his first class papers long ago, but keeps moving from place to place. Doesn't get along with his chiefs. The second one made first class this summer, and definitely wants to move up to co-ordinator. He's someplace in EVR now, getting sequence experience."

Alan glanced at Sam, who said quietly, "Let me have his name, and I'll look into it. You keep an eye on your new man." He rummaged about on his desk, picked up a correspondence cartridge, and clipped it into the viewer. "Latest on the *Look at Life* visit," he grunted. "We have a definite time now. The team will be here from Wednesday to Friday, two weeks from now. They'll follow the complete workup of one lecture. Rafferty is the interviewer. Very tough, very shrewd, very meticulous. But also very impartial. It's a good break, I think. Most say they forgot he was there until the direct conversations. Anyway, it's the best I could do." On that note, Alan and Nick left, each wondering what tomorrow's broadcast would bring.

It was too good to be true. They were not far from the end of the lecture now, and it had been a beautiful broadcast. Perhaps because they were all so keyed up, the atmosphere had been literally charged. The Unit had outdone themselves on the interpretations—Paul, for example, had been fantastic in Richard's death scene. There was no room for debate after he had shown the histrionic poet-philosopher bemoaning his fate, galvanised into action too late, revealing a tremendously tragic glimpse of latent, fiery majesty. There was a brief pause while the recognition of wasted potential was absorbed, then a deluge of student response. Alan would have congratulated himself, but he knew too well that the first two disturbances had come near the end of broadcast time. He was, however, almost two people right now; the first intensely involved with the discussion, providing answers, pulling students together, and the second coolly detached, watching, waiting.

When it finally happened he reacted so swiftly that the total elapsed time was a mere four seconds. Then they were back on and he was smoothly finishing the summary. Two minutes later they were off the network and he was out of the booth and bounding down on to the set. Most of the technical people were unaware that anything serious had happened, and Alan was sure that the break had simply appeared to be a transmission problem through the network. The Unit came babbling together, full of information and comment, not exactly jubilant, but excited because at last they had something to go on. As they quieted down, Alan swiftly began to assemble what they had learned.

"To begin with," he said, "we know for sure that it wasn't me."

Sylvia interrupted with—"Maybe four words, Alan. Four or five sounded like you."

"I hit the switch," he answered, "by the second word, I'm sure." The voice had begun asking a question, something like "Isn't there a textual problem here, on page . . ."

Paul jumped in with: "It was 'on page' where the change came. And then a mumbled apology. I heard it distinctly."

Olga was literally bouncing in her eagerness to speak. "A girl! It's a girl. You could hear the voice changing when she

realised she'd made a mistake. Whatever it was she thought she saw, when she got confused, embarrassed I think, her own voice came through."

Alan held up both hands to calm them. "That's what I was going to point out. When I cut the booth out, it did cut the voice off the network, but the change itself only came when she got flustered. Now, the big question that occurs to me is—does she know what she's been doing?"

There were shiftings and murmurings, but no one spoke up. Then Nick said, "I'm not sure about that. Wouldn't it be hard for her not to know? I mean, to make you ask the question she wants to ask—wouldn't that be too much of a coincidence if the thing were subconscious?"

Sylvia shrugged eloquently. "When Alan says something I've been thinking, I don't find it unusual. I suppose if you found people around you doing it all the time, you might get an inferiority complex, but you might also think that's just the way the world is."

Alan said shrewdly, "It's a question for a psychiatrist, at least, if not a psi researcher. But Nick, that wasn't all you were going to tell us."

Nick looked somewhat uncomfortable. "I suppose," he grumbled, "as long as we're taking this telepathy seriously, I might as well go all the way." He laced his fingers together and bent them back till the knuckles cracked. "You see, I can stand here and point in her direction." He stretched out an arm, roughly northwest Alan guessed, and stood rigid.

Nobody laughed. No one even smiled. Instead, Merle said to him, "I can go you one better. She's near-sighted. Real thick glasses." As she spoke, Alan called up a hazy, quick vision from the back of his mind, from the instant when his hand remained on the switch and he realised that the voice had faded, was finished. It had been blurred, almost unreadable, until it drew into focus as the page of the assigned play, *Richard II*, as if someone had adjusted a projector lens. At that point the voice had faltered, changed, and apologised. Merle continued. "She's young, nearsighted, and scared silly of the people around her. I only hope we haven't lost her."

Sylvia sighed softly. "I was nearly staggered by a terrible

feeling of frightened loneliness." She put her hand on Alan's arm. "I don't know if you felt it too, but I'm absolutely certain that she doesn't mean to cause us any trouble. And please, no matter how difficult it makes things for us, let's try not to hurt her." The rest all agreed, obviously, naturally, and Alan himself felt that they would have to be extremely careful in handling the situation. But come what may, they would have to find her, and soon too, very soon.

FOUR

THEY had finished a sober and very quiet dinner in Alan's apartment and were watching a massive line of thunderheads move relentlessly towards them across the plains. Sylvia had snuggled close, as if for protection from the elements, though both of them knew it was actually because of the threatening situation that neither could put aside. Then she sat up and pushed at her hair with a self-conscious laugh. "I was going to say that the weather reminded me of Act Three of *Lear*," she said, "and then I suddenly realised how much this thing has grown on us. When you put our problems alongside the play, though, they take on a little different perspective, don't they?"

Alan, who had been making exactly the same comparison, answered "Yes. And not only do they look a lot smaller, but I was thinking of how much better off *Lear* would have been with Sam and The Unit to help him."

Sylvia laughed whole-heartedly at that. "Can you picture Sam as *Lear's Fool*?"

Alan couldn't help smiling too at the vision of Sam in motley, but then he became serious again. "It's incredible that so much has happened in so short a time. But the main point that occurred to me was that we've never let this paralyse us. So far we've managed to cope, and even anticipate a little, even if we haven't solved anything."

Sylvia rose and began absently to leaf through the tape listings, then dialled a Segovia as Alan tossed over his AP Card. "I'd be a lot happier," she said, "if we could get just one problem out of the way. Find out who's behind the

sabotage, or be certain that Sam won't have to leave us. Get the *Look at Life* crew here and gone. Any of them is enough to worry about, without our uninvited guest wreaking havoc during broadcasts." She picked off a cassette as it came through the slot, and slipped it into the console.

Alan paced restlessly in front of the window, not yet soothed by the quiet guitar sounds that floated through the room. "We may not have disposed of any yet," he said more optimistically, "but Sam or Nick will have something new by tomorrow." As if it were a cue line, the door tone sounded, and Alan opened to find a smiling Nick and Sam waiting.

"Come look at my preetty peeecture," Nick smirked, as he twirled an imaginary moustache. He moved to the low table in front of the couch and unfolded a large map of the mid-continental grid. As the others gathered round he placed his scribe on Television Central.

"Now, considering that I took this down and laid it out on the studio floor first to get the direction, we have a very interesting development." He traced a light line northwest, into the prairie province area of Old Canada. "Depending on how accurately my location sense works, we have from three to eight possible classrooms. I personally feel that I could pinpoint the direction to within three degrees, but say five to be sure. That way we have Beatrice, Bassett, Pierre, Rapid City, Miles City, Willeston, Bismark, and perhaps Minot or Regina. I'd almost swear, though, that it's Beatrice, Bassett, or Miles City."

Alan stared intently at the map, mind racing furiously ahead. "How do we narrow them down for certain?" he asked, more to himself than anybody. "Do we have to visit each one personally during class time? And could we spot our girl that way?"

Sam had been watching with an amused expression, and now he slapped Alan on the back and said heartily, "We might not have to do half as much looking as you think. We were so busy trying the far-out places, like our Big Brain and the Continental Computer, that we missed the most obvious. You talked on set about the psi-fi tests that some of you have taken right here. Well, as it happens,

they're running a battery through the whole network. They've done students and faculty in the whole of the southwestern and northwestern quadrants, grid unit by unit, and are working on the northeastern now."

Sylvia had been listening with growing excitement, but now she frowned. "I suppose that their records are closed too, and we're right back where we started from."

Sam folded his arms and looked smug. "Already checked that," he grinned. "They won't give out names, but they will tell us if there are any high-potential psi cases in each of the eight classrooms that we've pinpointed. Even give some indication of which are latent telepaths. The well-developed cases are long since down here on special scholarships."

"How soon can they give us the information?" Alan asked.

"Monday morning," Sam replied briskly. "And by then, I expect we should have worked up a method of identifying the student absolutely." He moved to the door as Nick followed, folding his map. "See you at Scanlin's party," he said somewhat regretfully, and he and Nick were gone.

"Identifying her is one thing, Alan," Sylvia mused as they went slowly back to the couch, "but how we'll contact her and what will happen after that are the things that really bother me."

Alan reached out and set the lighting to "Fade off", then gave her knee a pat. "I'll work on that over the weekend myself," he reassured her. "It seems to be my job personally, since she works through me. And I'll try to be as warm and friendly as possible."

"Not too warm, now," Sylvia said archly, putting his hand back on her knee. "I'll bet she has a crush on you already." Beyond the window, the storm broke in magnificent fury, but now it was not really threatening. It was stimulating, exhilarating, as it crashed through the strains of guitar music still pulsing in the background.

The music pulsing in the background next evening was of a far different sort, and it added a great deal to the confusion and noise of the Scanlins' party. It was like some-

thing out of the 'seventies, with a trio of live "musicians" in one corner and a real, professional bartender in another. He was hand-mixing drinks from a disconnected autobar, and Alan had to admit that his own tasted better than the standard dial mix. The Scanlins had rented the social room in their court, and were really laying it on. "Now I believe those rumours about her family's perpetuated credit reserves," Sylvia remarked candidly, as she gazed across the crowded room to where Deborah Scanlin stood poised in a circle of admiring males, talking with languid gestures that shifted the planes of her see-around dress.

"No law of compensation working there," Alan muttered over his glass. "She's loaded with credits, and everything else too." Even from this distance one could see that the body behind the dress was as beautiful as the face above it. As they watched, Mrs. Scanlin caught sight of them over a male shoulder, said something which drew a burst of laughter, blew a kiss to her admirers and worked her way gracefully through the tangle of guests to them.

"Good evening, people," she tinkled at them. "Having a good time? My, it doesn't seem that long, but I'll bet we haven't met face to face for over a year. But I have the advantage there. I see you two or three times a week."

Alan looked surprised. "You mean to say you watch the lectures?" he asked.

"Wouldn't miss them," she replied. "I find the viewing rooms a great way to pass the time between vacations. And they are a bit more educational than Com Vid, aren't they? Yours is especially fascinating, of course. After all, we all—you, Don, me—we all love Shakespeare." If one were listening closely, the superficial playgirl banter slipped a fraction at the close.

Sylvia responded in an open, almost unsophisticated way. "Why, it's lovely to meet someone who really watches because she wants to, and not because she has to." Deborah's eyes narrowed, and Alan waited with concealed amusement for the sparring to end and the battle to begin. It was clear that these two weren't fooling one another. There was strong hostility deep beneath the amiable chit-chat. And Alan felt too that Deborah's manner was a bit

like her dress. You got a thousand fragmentary glimpses of the naked mind behind it, yet not enough to prove what was abundantly clear. It might have been an interesting few minutes, but Don Scanlin suddenly appeared, uneasy and overly-pleasant, to welcome them and point out mutual friends. Newcomers interrupted, and Alan and Sylvia took the opportunity to move away and mingle with the other guests.

Time passed quickly enough, and they found, rather surprisingly, that even in the close association of the Complex they were meeting people they hadn't spoken to for ages. Gradually, however, Alan realised that the administrators, of whom there were few, came mainly from the TriVid sector, and he wondered if anyone else saw the possible significance of it. He noted, as well, that Deborah paid special attention to these people. He had about decided that they would learn nothing else of any importance, and had come to the bar for one last set of drinks, when he found himself pinned behind two of these officials, deeply engrossed in their own conversation. He listened unabashedly while he waited his turn, as one of them said spiritedly, "I want to look at it soon. It's a whole new prospectus for the Shakespeare course, and Scanlin has some good ideas."

The other laughed in a jovial, heavy way and said, "Oh, come off it. A minute ago you were telling me you're getting bored here and might take an offer from World Communications. Just between us, Josh, is it a coincidence that Deborah Scanlin's family has a big chunk of credit reserves from that corporation?" Alan got his drinks and didn't wait to be seen by them. Perhaps he couldn't avoid it, but eavesdropping was still eavesdropping. Yet it was a very juicy piece of information to chew over, and later, when they had left the party, he and Sylvia decided that the pieces made a fairly obvious pattern. It was pretty clear that the Scanlins were mounting a strong campaign to get Don into TriVid, and that the Shakespeare course was their objective.

"I can't prove it, Alan," Sylvia said fretfully, "but I have the distinct feeling that it's mainly Deborah's idea. Don

no doubt wants it, but don't you think he's being pushed?"

Alan paused thoughtfully as they reached Sylvia's apartment door. "I could say it's your feminine instinct," he said with a humourless smile, "to make Deborah the villain. Still, taken in the context we have now, Don's actions would surely give that impression. If he were the mastermind, or even an equal conspirator, you'd think he would be at least as confident and devious as Deborah in public. After all, there's a good bit of ham actor in all of us lecturers, and you've got to concede that he's a first-rate one."

As they stood in the open doorway, Sylvia shivered and took his arm. "Stay?" she asked a trifle plaintively, and he nodded silently.

Monday proved to be a hectic day, as The Unit prepared the first broadcast on *Henry IV, Part I*. They had actually spent a good part of Sunday in Alan's apartment, mapping out much of what they would normally have discussed on set, and Alan had found himself fighting a tendency on everybody's part to change their usual approaches in order to cover any conceivable question. Finally he had called a halt. "We will not be stampeded," he said severely, "into changing the format that we've developed over such a long time, and with such hard work. If the girl does interrupt, we'll cover as best we can, but we owe it to the other students to stick to the methods they've begun to learn and use themselves." There was an uncomfortable pause, and then general if somewhat shamefaced agreement.

After that they had settled down to the usual intense, thoroughly integrated routine that characterised The Unit. But if they had thought the extra work would make the next day go more easily, they were mistaken. For one thing, they had to work while additions were being made to the circuitry. Alan's booth became a beehive of activity by nine o'clock, when the psi-fi report revealed that only two of the eight classrooms had female latent telepaths. Taking the chance that no others had been overlooked, Nick and Alan decided to set two of the monitors on open circuit to the Bassett and Miles City classrooms. Alan would be able to keep them both under observation during the broadcast,

and even control the tricons for scan and close-up right from the booth, overriding the classroom cameramen.

"We'll get you a little practice late tonight," Nick said, "and I can leave it patched for the broadcast in the morning. Now we'd better clear the mess away for the afternoon people." Ben had been doubling for both Nick and Alan at times through the morning, and the strain showed in all their faces as they left.

Instead of a leisurely lunch, however, Alan found himself summoned to Sam's office. "Sit down and hear some mixed news," Sam told him. "Do you want the good or the bad first?"

Alan slumped down and stretched his legs. "Give me the good first," he sighed. "I don't think I could take the bad just yet."

Sam chose a cigar from his private stock, lit up and puffed away with relish, and leaned forward. "You probably didn't miss me at the party," he said with false modesty, "but I was back in Toronto. The government advanced our trial budget date by two weeks last Friday night, and there was an emergency meeting Saturday. U. of Toronto has been playing coy with us and the Eastern grid, and suddenly it was time to decide. Well, after the usual few hours of horsing around, I threw in a little surprise. I gave them a half-hour argument on why U. of T. belonged in the East Coast grid. For a minute it almost backfired, because they both decided to have a look in the gift horse's mouth. But it worked." He held his hands clasped over his head in the classic pose. "Meet the winner, and sometime champion." Then he put both hands flat on the desk and said, "After all, why shouldn't it have worked. It was the only proper and workable solution in the first place."

Alan smiled his approval, "And so Sam Meynard, middle-aged prodigy, remains as the wonder producer of Television Central. Tremendous!" The glow of admiration didn't have much chance to settle over Alan, however, as he remembered the way Sam had greeted him. "All right," he said. "We've finally got one problem out of our hair. Now what's the bad news?" Sam grudgingly dropped his air of triumph and slid a memo over the desk to Alan. Alan read

silently, looked speculatively at the memo for a moment, and then passed it back with a soft whistle. "This one could be real trouble, or it could be straightened out in a few minutes. It depends on who's pushing, the union or someone upstairs." The matter was quite clear and simple. The union had complained that Nick was performing duties not covered in terms of contract. He could either be a director or a camera co-ordinator, but not both. If his status was not established at once, they would pull all cameramen off set. Less clear was an implied threat of action because of the previous breaches of contract, and it was to this that Alan referred, as Sam understood.

"It's technically my decision," he said, "but I leave it entirely up to you. Is he ready?"

Alan rose tiredly to his feet. "He's been ready for a year," he replied. "But it was ideal to have him co-ordinating as well. I only hope his replacement is half as good."

Sam reached for the phone. "I'll get his new contract sent down. You tell Nick about his promotion, and check his opinion of that first-bank cameraman. If Nick likes him and the union OK's it, we'll move him up temporarily until he writes his first-class papers—this weekend. Meanwhile, I'll softsoap some of my friends on the union executive. If no one has been bought off we may get out of it easily." As Sam placed his first call, Alan drifted out, wondering whether to skip lunch, get at the pile of work in his office, go back to his quarters and read thesis drafts, or write a fable about changing new problems for old. The strain was beginning to tell.

Tuesday morning the air fairly crackled with anticipation. Alan began by introducing the Elizabethan cyclical view of history, along with the theory that Shakespeare had wanted to write a complete cycle of the Wars of the Roses from his first play. He used *The Unit* to test the notion that one play anticipated another, and they skipped back and forth from play to play. The students were well-prepared and sceptical, and the discussion moved off the subject for the present, into the "facts" of history that the bard had found in the chronicles and skilfully trimmed or expanded

for good drama. This led to the last progression, the function of characters, and Alan masterfully directed and restrained the discussion so that they reached climax just short of examining the incomparable Falstaff. Then the broadcast was over, as planned. There had been no interruption!

They reacted first with almost hysterical relief, and then slipped rapidly into a mood of depression. The women expressed it first, when Merle wondered aloud whether the girl had been frightened into dropping the course. Alan noted that both classrooms on the monitors had appeared completely filled, but agreed that this didn't prove anything.

Olga said with mixed feelings, "Perhaps she's decided to give up asking questions."

But Sylvia put the situation back into perspective when she replied, "Oh, maybe we're just over-reacting because we women will have to take a back seat for the next broadcast."

That was another sobering thought for Alan, who hadn't really considered the problem of bringing extra men on set for Friday. This play, more than any other of Shakespeare's, was a man's play, and they would be working with people normally outside *The Unit*. He doubted there would be any difficulty with Jack Kirby, whose superlative Falstaff always worked beautifully opposite Paul's Prince Hal, but he was less secure about their new Hotspur, and the extras of Falstaff's gang. With a sort of mental crossing of fingers he reassured the women that they could all be off-camera, if they wished, and that he would actually prefer that they be there. "After all," he said, "we don't want to break the magic circle." The others left with somewhat more confidence than he himself felt, and he decided that Wednesday's rehearsal would have to be even more intensive. The one thing he was certain of, though he couldn't say why, was that the girl had not dropped out, and that sooner or later she would be prompted to ask one of her devastating questions.

THE next two days were filled with feverish activity, as The Unit, with its traditional cast, sought to make the production as foolproof as possible. Alan set aside his many other jobs temporarily to concentrate on the coming broadcast and booked extra time in rehearsal rooms, an unusual action which brought a few raised eyebrows. Everyone knew, however, of the coming visit of the *Look at Life* staff, and assumed that it was this that had The Unit jumping, a mistake that Alan welcomed and didn't bother to correct with even his closest associates. The newcomers were a bit startled by the amount of work required of them, even Jack Kirby noting that they had never made him sweat like this before—literally sweat, he commented at the end of one session as he wiped his dripping face with a towel. The extras finally concluded, with a grudging admiration, that if this was what it took to reach the top, then The Unit deserved every bit of its enviable reputation. Again, Alan didn't try to set them straight. He knew, as they did, that they had never worked this hard, and the experience would be good for them if they were serious about their profession.

In all, by broadcast time on Friday they were polished and flexible, and he was satisfied that they were ready for any possibility, no matter how far out it might be. The least talented of the extras was working well over his head, and thoroughly savouring the feeling of being part of such a group.

Alan began by recapping the discussion at the close of the last lecture, evolving his own theory now that Shakespeare, the great economist, had made what amounted to a fortunate mistake in creating Falstaff. As he drew from his students the large number of functions that the fat knight performed in the play, it became clear that these would explain how Falstaff had grown to nearly unmanageable proportions and threatened to take over the play. To illustrate, Paul and Jack Kirby played several of the scenes in which Falstaff and Prince Hal appeared, and Falstaff, of course, became larger and more complex with each new function.

It was so good that Alan had virtually nothing to do to keep the class moving. The character of Hal himself was the next obvious subject, and Paul spoke his initial soliloquy twice, first showing the wild but honourable young Prince and second the egotistic, heartless, calculatingly honest plotter. Paul did so well that the choice was left wide open. As he moved through the play to Hal's victory over Hotspur and soliloquy over the fallen hero's body, themes emerged in sharp delineation, without a clear margin for either interpretation. It was perfect for the purposes of the lecture.

The students now pinpointed Act III, scene ii, as the crucial point of the play. Here, in the thematic climax, King Henry and Hal finally met, and Hal was forced to declare the purpose he had hidden for so long under his madcap actions. Ben and Paul took the two interpretations and ran them through, Ben excelling as the guilt-ridden, ageing, angry king. Paul first gave Hal as the brilliant but impulsive youth, stung into an overly proud response, then as the clever, callous tactician for whom people and honour were things to be used for the good of the state. Finally a small but significant margin appeared, favouring the first interpretation, and Alan was about to cap it with Hal's final speech of the play when Merle, using a borrowed mike, hissed over the intercom, "Here it comes."

Instantly, Alan cut off the booth, throwing a glance at the two monitors. In almost the same sweep, he caught on both of them a glimpse of a girl with heavy glasses. As before, the voice came through like his, and he half-listened to the question while he brought both figures into close-up and debated wildly which of them it was. "These are the standard interpretations that have been accepted for years," the voice said, as he watched in vain for a sign of lip movement. "Isn't it possible, though, that Hal is completely unscrupulous and that King Henry has really—caught him with the goods, I guess you'd say—when he accuses him of being willing to turn traitor? Wouldn't he have to back off then and change his plans?"

Even as he struggled with his decision, Alan had to admit

that the question was a very perceptive insight, and then, with a blinding realisation, he knew which of the girls it was. The text! She had been reading a real text of *Richard II* in class, and one of these two had a solid, old-fashioned book on her lap. His gesture was almost casual as he switched the booth back in, split the screen, and cut in the girl.

"I'm sorry," he said gently, "but I don't think your question went to the other classrooms. Would you repeat it, please?"

There was a brief excruciating moment of dead silence, and Alan could see terror mounting in the girl's widening eyes behind the thick glasses. On set, Paul and Ben were looking to the booth, frozen into place. Then, with a gulp, in a voice trembling with fear, she began to speak. In her own voice, softer even as it gained strength than it had sounded when she had slipped a week ago, she put her question again. Alan picked it up, stressing its originality in manner calculated to be encouraging without being overly flattering. He caught Ben from the corner of his eye, holding up thumb and forefinger in a circle, and without further discussion switched to the set for a test of the theory.

Immediately, he called Nick on the intercom and snapped, "Get Sam on to the instructor in the Miles City classroom. We've got to get that girl down here as quickly as possible. But for Heaven's sake, don't scare her to death. I thought she was going to pass out when she went on camera." On the master, Ben paused deliberately and then pinned Paul with a measured and scathing:

*Why, Harry, do I tell thee of my foes,
Which art my near'st and dearest enemy?
Thou that art like enough, through vassal fear,
Base inclination and the start of spleen,
To fight against me under Percy's pay,
To dog his heels and curtsy at his frowns,
To show how much thou art degenerate.*

With a startled and guilty look, Paul stammered out:

*Do not think so; you shall not find it so:
And God forgive them that so much have sway'd
Your majesty's good thoughts away from me!*

Then with a crafty switch of subject, he burst out:

I will redeem all this on Percy's head . . .

and the rhetoric flowed on to a ringing, yet slightly false, climax. It was very plausible, very tempting, but despite the consummate skill of delivery it didn't quite convince. Alan eased into the concluding statements on the play without pressing the point, and was pleased to see that the girl was dispassionately jotting notes. It was over, or rather, it was just beginning he decided, as the broadcast ended and he walked down to the set.

Jack Kirby and the others were a bewildered looking bunch.

"What was that all about, Alan?" Jack asked, but Nick interrupted with a quick: "Nice cover, Alan. I'll get the technicians to check out the circuits right away." Alan smiled innocently and Jack, after a quick glance at the confused extras, said, "Yeah, Alan, nice cover. Sure gave Ben and Paul time to reach for that far-out question." As the other men moved away, more or less convinced that they understood what had happened, Jack said in a low voice, "Whatever has been going on, I gather you've got it licked now. Do me a favour, though. If there's something screwy next time I guest, let me in on it beforehand."

Alan laughed weakly. "Jack, I promise you that when we do get it cleared up, I'll invite you out for drinks and tell you all about it. Thanks for giving me the benefit, and have fun back in New York." They shook hands cordially, and Jack left as The Unit gathered around Alan for a post-mortem.

Explanations took very little time, but quickly as they were given Sam was on the set with news. "Her name is Janet Ganski," he announced abruptly, "she's a second-year student, and she has reluctantly accepted an invitation to take part in a student-staff experiment being held here be-

ginning Monday. She's been cleared from her other courses for an indefinite period, and her reservations are confirmed for Sunday. The suite next to yours is vacant, Sylvia, and because of the intimate nature of this, uh, experiment, she'll be moving in there instead of student housing. I expect that you, Olga, and Merle will make her welcome."

Continuing over the excited buzz, he spoke to Nick. "If you'd like to sign the papers in my office, The Unit can congratulate its new director. Alan, you have a brief to prepare for the new budget reporting on why a full director is needed for these courses, in addition to the Senior Lecturer. Now, Nick, can you introduce me to your temporary coordinator?"

He and Nick set off for the far end of the studio, while the rest tried to assimilate all the new information, and Alan fielded a host of questions. Then they retired to a business room in the cafeteria to plan for the coming meeting with Miss Janet Ganski.

Alan sipped absently at the coffee Sylvia had placed on his desk, while he checked over his work of the past few hours. It wasn't a masterpiece, he felt, but it would do if no one took it to bits in a close examination. He swung round and handed it to Sylvia. "Our application for the grant that Sam has already begun using," he told her. "An experiment in the use of a student consultant during production. To determine the value of instantaneous feedback. To determine the value of anticipating student reactions before broadcast. To determine the value of acquainting students with production techniques. And one or two minor areas of investigation. What do you think?"

Sylvia read it over, and gave it back with a nod of approval. "It takes a lot longer to read," she said, "but it sounds valid to me. You know, I realise that we're pulling a fast one because we're desperate to get hold of Miss Ganski. Yet I can't help wondering why no one has tried this before under normal circumstances. If I were on the Grants Committee, I'd consider this a brilliant idea."

Alan picked up his cup and left the desk. "I don't know," he answered, "but I'd guess it has roots back in the 'seventies, when the students made their big bid for power in the

old university system, and then abandoned the shambles they'd made of the whole affair."

"I've heard Ben talk about those days," Sylvia said, "and yet I can't imagine what it must have been like. I can't conceive of taking an undergraduate degree without those thousands of EVR courses to choose from, or not having had the best Senior Lecturers to listen to and work with for my Master's."

Alan laughed bitterly. "You've had the best of two worlds," he said. "You got complete democracy at the undergraduate level, and complete autocracy when you proved that you could grasp the advantage of a system where you acknowledged your inferiority, both temporary and permanent. We're pretty lucky that enough of the old system survived the days of anarchy to build our present system on."

Sylvia looked bemused, and then shrugged it off prettily. "Well," she said, "I'm happy with my personal autocrat, and it seems that the students are happy enough with the rest. Meanwhile, let's talk about something I understand a little better. What can we do to make Janet Ganski's meeting with The Unit as painless and fruitful as possible?"

There was no doubt, both of them knew from the afternoon's discussion, that all of The Unit, themselves included, were more than a trifle apprehensive about having a telepath on set with them. Alan was still seeking a plan by which she could be integrated without upsetting the cohesion of the group. "I've been wondering," he thought aloud, "if we could get people to arrive one or two at a time on Monday. It might not be enough just to stagger the meetings with the women on Sunday, and then have her meet Ben, Paul, and Nick together next day. You and I will pick her up at the complex terminal, Olga will be at the suite, and Merle can drop in after she gets comfortable. How's that?"

Sylvia gave him an arch look and added, "And Dr. Hamilton leaves us at the door. Yes, I think that will work pretty well. Trust me to make her feel at home." They left it at that, and actually it did work out well. The real problem was not in introducing her to The Unit, as it

turned out, but in getting The Unit to function at all once Janet Ganski was among them. That very nearly brought total ruin on Monday.

There seemed, superficially, nothing outstanding about her when they met on Sunday afternoon. Average height and build, light brown hair and eyes, and potential prettiness, the sort that would need the right clothes and some help from cosmetics. If there was anything genuinely attractive about her, it was offset by the heavy, old-fashioned glasses. When Sylvia and Alan approached her, she emanated uncertainty and apprehension, and it was clear that she used the glasses as a shield from the world. They tried to put her at ease, chatting about her trip, her work, and the new experiment generally, but she remained much like some frightened animal, helpless between human captors. Nothing was said yet of her special talent, but they all knew that they would have to speak of it sooner or later, and it was largely this knowledge that created the tension between them. When they arrived at Sylvia's suite, Alan left, still unsure of how he would handle the problem, but determined that the three of them would have to talk it out later in the evening.

Merle and Olga had more success making Janet intellectually, if not emotionally, aware that they were not about to put her through some brutal inquisition. In fact, Olga, with her special kind of compassion and outwardness, made good progress in establishing a "big-sister" bond, a phrase which she used when she and Merle reported briefly to Alan after the women had eaten supper in Janet's suite. Another thing which seemed to help was the comic confusion over ordering the meal. Janet had clearly been torn by a desire to be alone and the obligation to act as hostess, and something else as well. The others had simply ordered what they wanted, but Janet had hesitated, and settled for a cup of coffee.

It was when she took her AP Card from her carry-all that Sylvia realised what was bothering the girl. With a light laugh she said, "I suppose, like the rest of us, you'll be wondering how in the world you can spend all those extra credits you've got now. But even here, where there's not all

that much to use them on, you'll soon start getting on to the blue, and maybe even on to the red. Right, girls?"

Janet blushed, and looked totally confused. "I thought," she stammered, "I mean—don't I just stay on the student stipend?" That brought a hoot of laughter from the others.

"Not at all, Janet," Merle chuckled. "Everyone here gets forty per cent extra for skill participation." Janet's eyes grew big behind the glasses, and her blush grew deeper yet. Merle, who had caught the significance of it all, capitalised on the situation. "You're part of the team now, Janet," she smiled, "and we'll probably work you to death for your credits. But if you're here long enough you'll catch the skill work bug and be spoiled for anything else for the rest of your life." She put an arm over the girl's shoulder and added softly, "We think our group—The Unit—is something special, and we think you're special too."

She didn't pursue the point, but it wasn't lost on Janet, and the incident seemed to break down a bit of the barrier between them all. If she wasn't totally reassured, at least the girl seemed to accept them as well-meaning and friendly, and she provided an amusing finish by ordering a shrimp cocktail with a flourish of her "power card", as she called it.

Alan was tactful but frank when he dropped in later with Sylvia. Janet had been given a chance to rest and sort things out, and he felt that it would be pointless to waste time. He opened by telling her flatly that they had been interested primarily in getting her to Television Central on any pretext, and she reacted calmly but warily. Then he went on to say that the means which they had used were a sudden inspiration, but that they were genuinely concerned about using her talents in some way. Hence the reasons for bringing her might have been expressed rather vaguely, yet fundamentally they were exactly correct.

Janet had listened attentively, and now she spoke as openly as Alan had. "I just didn't think, the first time I asked a question. You see, I hate being out in—on display. I found out a long time ago that I could get other people to ask for me. But then it wasn't with people like you, just other students, and right away this time I felt I was making

a mistake. I mean, it isn't just you, Professor Hamilton. Once I connected, if you can see what I mean by that, I could feel all the others in back of you. It scared me. More than all the confused thoughts and feelings that I've learned to shut out. And they were so bad when I was younger that I nearly had a breakdown once or twice. Exams. They were terrible, you know." She paused and hugged herself for a second, as if she'd had a chill.

"The second time, I didn't mean to at all, but there's something about all of you that's different. As if, when we touched the first time, it kind of fused or something. Now it's very easy to think to you. The question was asked before I could cut it off." She looked quite guilty at this point.

"I suppose that wouldn't be so bad," she continued, "but it goes through you, not only to you. I've never had that happen before, and I just knew that it caused a lot of trouble. There was a flurry behind you, like—like when you startle a flock of birds, almost. And I caught a hint of anger too. I would never have let you hear me again, if the third time I hadn't been simply too wrapped up in the book to realise I was thinking 'out loud', and then it was too late, and I had made a mistake, and I was wide open for the backlash."

She kept her eyes down, fingering the hem of her tunic. Then she looked up with a timid smile. "That was probably my worst mistake, because the big feeling that came back at me was a kind of mixture of triumph and curiosity. It got me curious too, but I couldn't get up the courage to try it again until—until you put me right out in front of all those thousands of people. Honestly, I could have died on the spot. You don't know what it's like to have all those people touching you, as if you were in the middle of a spider's web." She looked straight at Alan, and suddenly he did know, graphically and shudderingly, and Sylvia jumped up and instinctively made a move to brush herself off.

"I'm sorry," Janet said breathlessly, "I shouldn't have done that."

"No," Alan said, "I think we deserved it. And it certainly

was instructive." He glanced at Sylvia, who was cautiously sitting down, and she agreed fully.

"Anyway," Janet continued, "I might have just run away and hid if I hadn't already half-decided that I ought to be bold and take a chance. It's the first time anyone has really talked, thought, back to me. Oh, some people have reacted, the way you pull your finger back when you touch something hot. But someone deliberately thinking at me, Me!" Alan had a frightening glimpse of absolute loneliness, of naked hunger for companionship, and then it was cut off.

"Janet," he said reassuringly, "I think you know now that we're all pretty reasonable in The Unit. I can't tell if we can give you all the things you need, but we're certainly not going to hurt you if we can help it, and we're vitally interested in finding out ways to use you in the group, not keep you quiet."

She gave him a warm, sincere smile and answered: "I think you all mean well, and in spite of a little reluctance I think everyone is trying hard to be at least scientifically neutral. One or two are a little worried that I might see things they don't want to show."

Alan was pleased that she had brought it up. "Tell me," he said, "how much control do you really have? For example, was the whole group feeling what Sylvia and I felt just now?"

"I don't think so," she said hesitantly. "I can control my 'sending' better than I can my 'receiving'. And I can't go into people's minds, though some are better at hiding thoughts than others. You people, for instance, seem to have a kind of circle that I can only get into by way of you, Alan." She looked quite wistful. "You share a lot of your ideas and feelings already, and the warmth and love among you is unbelievable. Like nothing I've ever known. It must be wonderful."

That was the substance of the evening's work. They talked for a while longer, but nothing much was added. They all looked forward to the next day with mixed feelings; Sylvia with hopeful eagerness, Alan with some uncertainty about how to proceed, and Janet with growing determination to be useful, to earn a place, to be wanted.

She had become so determined by morning, it developed, that she tried too hard, and in so doing created confusion and near disaster.

As planned, while the women showed up more or less together, the men took care to arrive in the studio at reasonably spaced intervals, and yet, as nearly as Alan could discern absolutely nothing happened by way of a reaction on either hand. Once they were all assembled, they began to put the first broadcast on *Henry V* together, Janet sitting attentively with The Unit, listening and taking in a great deal. At the first break, however, when Alan asked how she was getting along, she admitted being quite confused.

"You all understand so completely what you're doing that you move in jumps, and I have to piece the missing parts together. By then I've missed something, like as not, and have to catch up." Nevertheless, she kept at it when they began work again, occasionally taking a quick look at the prompt scanner, which Alan had been editing for snap cues as they went along. It was after they had settled the probable primary and secondary scenes and interpretations that real trouble began.

Nick had blocked in rough lighting and movements as they went, and now began shuffling hardware with the technical crew, while the rest of The Unit began doing lines. What appeared to be complete chaos was actually a fine, smooth-running set of operations which eventually would merge, each individual group being partly conscious of the rest of the surrounding action, but concentrating on its own problem. Janet was totally engrossed now, trying to follow everything that was going on, desperately attempting to see the whole picture, and obviously having difficulty.

On stage, Paul was doing Henry, while Ben did several smaller parts, a few of which would be covered by one bit player coming on later. Off to one side, the women were doing a scene at the French court. Nick was working with Ben and Paul, and shouting the odd instruction off into the gloom. "We are no tyrant, but a Christian king," Paul de-

claimed, "swing the baby klieg to stage right." Nick looked startled, started to say something, and thought better of it. Ben frowned, Paul looked confused, but then they continued through the next bit of dialogue, until the point where Ben, as the French ambassador, was to present Paul with the contemptuous gift of tennis balls from the Dauphin.

He opened the chest with a flourish and sneered "Alice, tu as été en Angleterre. . . ." then stood with mouth open as the women swung around to gape.

"Not fair, Ben," Merle called out. "Stick to your own lines."

And Sylvia said, "Make sure the casket opens to face bank two tricons."

Alan jumped, put both hands to his head and cried, "Hold it!" The Unit, at any rate, seemed to realise simultaneously what was happening, and everyone tried to talk at once. "All right, all right!" Alan yelled at the centre of the confused group. "Let's try to make some order out of this." The noise subsided into uneasy silence.

"Now," Alan said firmly, "it's clear that we're getting crossed up with one another's thoughts. Let's find out what we can do to sort them out." He held up a flat palm as they all tried to talk at once again. "Wait. It's Janet who's giving us the extra push, I think, so she'll have to help us get uncrossed. Janet!" he called, as he turned to look out into the darkness.

Off towards the studio doors there was a clatter and crash and Alan (with the others) felt sharp pain at shins and forehead, followed by brief vertigo. Olga swayed and reached out to Merle to steady herself, as Alan bolted off stage after Paul, who had already vaulted a chair and was dodging between pieces of equipment. When Alan got to them, Paul was already crouched beside a crumpled, pitiful Janet, holding an arm about her shoulders as she sobbed uncontrollably.

"I botched it," she finally managed to gasp out. "I botched the whole thing for you." For the moment there was nothing that Alan could say. He merely picked up the shattered glasses that lay in front of her, watched with

compassion as she lifted a tear-streaked face and stared blindly at the blurred figures gathered around her.

Six

It couldn't properly be called an argument, but the heated discussion that took place in Alan's office that afternoon was about as close to it as The Unit had ever come. The women were all for keeping Janet closely involved, even during the coming broadcast, while the men were more cautious, arguing that they couldn't afford a breakdown on network. Olga insisted that Janet had probably learned enough to remain aloof and simply watch, and Merle dismissed the importance of retaining perfection. "Everyone is entitled to a below-average shot once in a while," she said. "And if we mess up, you can cover for us with straight lecture, Alan."

Sylvia rounded out their position by anticipating Alan's objections. "If we don't get her integrated now," she pointed out, "we'll have to wait until the *Look at Life* crew is gone. It may seem like a short time, but it could tear Janet all to pieces." The men picked up the threatening visit as the nub of their own objections, but their arguments were less effective in the face of Sylvia's logic. Alan let them exhaust their reasoning, frustrations as much as anything, and then offered the only compromise which he felt was operable.

"We'll want to rig an observation area anyway, for the *Look at Life* visit," he stated, "and we need the adjustment to having someone in the studio if we're to perform up to standard. I doubt any of them will project, or whatever we can call it, the way Janet does, but if we can get used to her, then nothing should ever bother us again. Let's set up the area and put her in it. I have a feeling that she's going to be very careful from now on."

The others agreed to this. They split up, the men to work in a rehearsal room with the extra, the women off on some mysterious expedition, and Alan to revise his lecture notes for any emergency that might arise.

Late in the afternoon, Sam came in to check on their progress with Janet. He listened to Alan's account of the

past two days' events with an air of deep concern, but agreed at the end that Alan's decision seemed the only workable solution. "I hope you don't drop the quality too much," he commented. "Rafferty is going to pick up something like that a half-hour after he hits the complex. There are enough rumours floating around here about you people as it is these days."

He prowled restlessly about the office, then moved close to Alan's desk. "Incidentally, speaking of rumours, I picked up a few more too. Don Scanlin and his wife seem to be in a stew about something. Had a big row in public at a Saturday night party. Don's been hitting the juice heavily lately too. He's a drinker, but always in company, you know. This past week he's been drinking alone, brooding over something. The word is that his socialite wife is fraternising with one of his crew over at EVR. Interesting?"

Alan chewed over the bits of information, but couldn't make them add up to anything concrete. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

Sam walked slowly to the door and turned. "I have a theory," he replied, "but I can't prove it now. Meanwhile, there's been no sabotage on your set for a while, so I guess we cross our fingers and hope. Tell Nick to be extra careful, though," he directed. "It would be murder if someone threw a wrench in the works while Rafferty was here." One more thing to worry about, Alan thought, as Sam left him to his lecture.

Tuesday morning opened with a pleasant shock for Alan and the other men. A grinning bevy of women entered the studio, shepherding Miss Janet Ganski—the new Miss Janet Ganski. She wore a simple tunic that hinted at a shapely figure which had been completely concealed before. Subtle makeup and an unswept hairdo had softened her rather blunt features and accented high cheekbones and dark eyes. The glasses were gone for ever. She had been given a rush priority fitting for contacts. Now she stood in an admiring circle, very self-conscious and girlish, but already acquiring some of the poise needed for her transformation. She would never win a Miss North America contest, but Janet was

certainly attractive enough for more than a passing glance. Paul seemed particularly taken, and it was more than professional interest that brought him back to talk to her during the pre-broadcast break.

The broadcast itself went far better than they had any right to expect. In the booth, Alan opened immediately with a discussion of themes, weaving the previous material together to show Shakespeare's growing concern for the qualities of the ideal king, reviewing their culmination in the *Henry IV* plays, and setting out the conflict of a complex man with the demands of ideal kingship in *Henry V*. There were times, as the broadcast progressed, when a faint stir of 'alien' thought touched all of them, and they had vague hints of each other's concentration, but nothing more than that happened.

At the close, when Alan wrapped it up, a great wave of relief washed over The Unit, and Janet lay back in her seat and visibly went limp. It was clear that she had been exerting tremendous control and was totally exhausted by it. But she was just as obviously pleased with her effort, and accepted the compliments of the rest with a mixed eagerness and modesty. It seemed that they just might be all right from now on. Only Alan worried, for the moment, that this was in fact a quite negative relationship, and not at all what they ought to be working for, but even he was relieved that they hadn't been upset by complications. Let us get the *Look at Life* ordeal over, he thought, and then we can really come to grips with the integration problem.

Rafferty was thin-faced, long-nosed, affable and impish, and he had had one night to sniff around. He knew that some odd and interesting things were going on around Television Central, knew that The Unit was involved, and was practically bristling with invisible antennae. He had chosen not to meet any of the staff yet except Alan, but the two of them had hit it off well together, with the mutual respect that professionals both command and give. He sat in the observation area, and it soon became apparent that he had that knack for seeming to disappear peculiar to good reporters and pry-eyes. Whether it was that or the experience of adjusting to Janet wasn't certain, but The Unit

actually forgot he was there within a short time. He had brought only one assistant into the studio, a tiny man who moved unobtrusively among the technicians and took footage with the smallest sound camera Alan had ever seen.

They spent the whole evening doing the usual work-up, taking Alan's outline and putting flesh on it, asking questions about anticipations, looking back to the previous broadcast, discussing interpretations and variations. At one point Alan asked Janet's opinion on student reaction, and later Ben did the same. Her answers were direct and helpful and she became even more at ease with The Unit. They themselves could still feel, however, a tenuous but tough barrier most of the time, indicating that she was exerting a powerful control over her telepathic ability. On the rare occasion when she slipped there was a swirl of thoughts, from which they were forced to separate their own and try to hold on to them. It was a strange sensation, something like working one's own fishing line out of a tangle of several. The morning went well, and when Alan went to lunch with Rafferty the correspondent was impressed with what he had seen.

In the afternoon, Rafferty's crew split up, one going with Nick, another with the actors, and Rafferty with Alan to his office for a brief period. They discussed the innumerable threads of production, the techniques of putting them together, and the little legman took some shots and went elsewhere. When Rafferty commented on Janet, it was merely to ask if this was usual procedure. His interest picked up when Alan explained that it was a new experiment, but he seemed satisfied with his own notion that The Unit would be a logical choice to try it out. Alan neither ducked the subject nor expanded on it, and they quickly moved to other matters.

After that, the *Look at Life* people had their own meeting, and the rest of the afternoon and evening went normally. Alan and Sylvia found they had little to say about the day, save that it had been almost too smooth, and spent the remainder of the evening simply enjoying one another's company.

Thursday was nearly a carbon copy of Wednesday with The Unit moving to scene work, in the midst of lighting, costuming, props, and movements. Janet was there again, supplying a few more opinions during breaks, and much more comfortable with the hubbub and noise, hence much more in control of herself. Rafferty spent some time in the observation area, asked a few basic points of information from Janet about mid-way through the morning, and left. In short, everything was so natural and uncomplicated that Alan began to wish for a problem of some sort to shake them up a little. Nothing desperate, he hastily told himself, just a little problem to keep them on their toes. But it didn't come, and the day went by like a smooth-flowing river to its quiet close. An ominously quiet close.

Alan was a bit late in arriving at his office the next morning. Rafferty had phoned to ask a few last-minute questions, such as where his crew could monitor the broadcast, and whether his legman could film during broadcast, which Alan reluctantly allowed. He paused only to scribe a line in his notes, noted an urgent call from Don Scanlin, tried to reach him and couldn't, then headed to the bays. He checked the set and studio swiftly but carefully with Nick, saw the dim figure of Rafferty, caught a glimpse of Janet next to the prompt scanner, and slipped into the booth about seventy-five seconds before cue. All equipment working, notes open, and he was on, settling into the familiar routine and concentrating completely on the lecture. Two-thirds into the broadcast, all hell broke loose.

Not that they hadn't had warning, Alan realised, even as it happened. For some moments, unconsciously, he'd felt strain building, till the air was almost crackling. Then, with an all but audible snap, while The Unit was working over Act V, scene ii, all of them on-stage for the final scene in the French court, his mind seemed to open and encompass another half-dozen personalities.

There was Merle, mind crying out: "Up above! It's going to fall."

Almost instantaneously, Nick was literally pushing people into new positions, propelling them mentally.

Paul was speaking. "Now, welcome Kate: and bear me

witness all..." and on the line he swept Sylvia into his arms and moved forward and to the side. The others scattered in good order, and the co-ordinator found himself switching to a close-up of the Royal couple. "... That here I kiss her as my sovereign queen," Paul finished, Alan cut himself back in, and one end of a long light boom came arcing down, chopping into the stage floor with a grinding crash, sending shards of shattered lenses and twisting power line through the space where most of them had been, from a dozen demolished spots and floods.

Through it all, Alan kept the discussion going, one part of his mind cool and detached, even as he felt the hysterical terror of Olga, ebbing under the strength, calmness and comfort of Ben and Paul. Woven through the whole was a sense of bonding, of direction, of taut energy which Alan recognised as coming from Janet. He could feel that she was shunting some of the whirlpool aura from him, redirecting it to the others, and that she was somehow submerging her own personality to act as a kind of switching agent for the rest.

It was over quickly and The Unit physically huddled in front of the ruined set, when he felt them joining, thinking towards him as one, willing encouragement and warmth as he continued bringing students together, commenting, questioning, leading. There was wonder, respect and admiration, together with a great, tender regard for one another, and especially for Janet. Alan had never known such a command over his subject. He was working beyond his own abilities now, drawing unsuspected reserves from the whole of The Unit, even to details of information and insights previously buried within the group. His own sense of gratitude and admiration for the rest grew and spread among them.

Even as he brought the lecture to a close with an awesome summation, he was aware of a scuffle at the doors of the studio. Successive thrills of discovery, fright, accusation, disgust, and finally pity coursed through The Unit and lapped at the edges of Alan's consciousness as he visualised Don Scanlin, white, shaken, and desperately trying to explain something to an enraged Sam Meynard. The monitors

went dead and he rose on leaden legs to join the group, only to find with a sense of overwhelming loss that he was suddenly alone again. There was a flickering sensation as one by one they all made distant contact, and when he reached The Unit the reason was plain. They were hovering over an unconscious Janet, filled with worry and only vaguely aware of their own groping attempts to rejoin. Sam stood menacingly over Don Scanlin, sprawled in a chair with his long legs angled in front of the excited Rafferty, but Alan, like the rest, was only concerned for Janet.

It was an eternity to them before she stirred and groaned, then sat up dizzily. As she opened her eyes and looked slowly around in a bewildered way, relief, love, and exaltation welled up and flowed over her to enfold her within The Unit. They were whole again in a way which made each a merged part, yet preserved them as separate and distinct. They could withhold or give what they wished, and they would have a long time together to adjust, to overcome a certain shyness.

Exhausted as they were, physically, mentally, emotionally, they gathered in Alan's apartment that evening to assess the fantastic events of the morning. Without exception, they had slept the afternoon away, though Alan had first finished his interview with Rafferty, and later Sam. He recapped the main points of the conversation. It might have been possible simply to open his mind, but they had already learned the tremendous toll it took to think so completely to one another. It was even harder without some problem or crisis as focus and catalyst. As yet, emotions and random thoughts passed among them without concentration.

Rafferty had got more story than he bargained for, and he was quivering with his desire to get away and work it out. He couldn't find enough superlatives for The Unit, and had actually stumbled after words to describe their reaction under pressure. "Never experienced anything like it," he had stammered. "Maybe during the Non-War. That smooth motion away from the boom that came down. Not a break in the dialogue, not a break in the action. My crew outside, watching the monitor cube, they never knew a thing had happened. Incredible!" Alan mimicked the correspondent's

jerky gestures. "And that character Scanlin. Busting in with Meynard right behind him, and The Unit not caring a damn. Looking after the girl instead." He had gone on like that for some time, finally running down enough for Sam and Alan to discuss how much ought to be revealed of Don Scanlin's part in the affair.

Sam had said what they all now felt, that Don had been guilty of enough to warrant dismissal, but he deserved some mitigation beyond that. He had been involved in the earlier attempts at sabotage, led by his own ambition and envy of The Unit and Alan, but it was painfully evident that Deborah Scanlin had driven him much further than he wanted to go. He had finally balked and she, with the help of the technician suspected by Sam and Alan, had plotted the last incident. It had been appallingly simple. He had slipped in during the night, wrapped several turns of soft solder round the bight of the end piece of strapping holding the boom, removed the nut and bolt, and left. He knew that the heat of the spot directly beneath it would loosen the solder. Whether it happened while some one was onstage, or before, seemed not to have troubled him one whit.

Deborah and Don had got into a roaring argument at breakfast and she had produced her great coup with a belittling tirade. Don, horrified, had tried to reach Alan and then raced for the studio while Deborah, wisely, had left hurriedly for a vacation—somewhere in seclusion. Rafferty was all for releasing all the details, until Sam tactfully brought up the matter of her family's holdings and influence. The correspondent still obviously ached to write the whole truth, but he reluctantly agreed that his editors would surely suppress it, considering the magafax's shaky finances. At the end, the three men had parted on excellent terms, Rafferty still singing the praises of The Unit.

Peace and gentle satisfaction permeated Alan's suite, as the couples sat together talking quietly. Ben and Merle, Nick and Olga were in a far corner, planning a joint trip to the Bermudas for Christmas. Sylvia and Alan were watching more than talking, comfortably settled in the usual place on the low couch before the window.

"Well," Alan heaved a deep sigh, "I'd say we made his-

tory of some sort today, though not many people would understand it, even if we could explain it."

Sylvia snuggled close and purred as she answered. "We'll probably make a little more history before we've finished too. It's going to be mighty interesting developing The Unit's new talents. Janet is nowhere near her full potential, I'd guess, and that probably goes for all of us. I only hope she'll stay."

Alan gave a knowing laugh and nodded towards the closed window and balcony. "She'll stay," he chortled. "Even if she hadn't merged with The Unit she'd stay."

Out on the balcony, absolutely oblivious to the fact that they were coatless in a growing curtain of drifting snowflakes, Janet and Paul were enclosed in their own little world. Sylvia placed her hand in Alan's and murmured, "That's good. So good for both of them." Then she sat up straight and hugged herself. "But darn it, I wish they'd come in. I'm freezing to death."

ASPECT OF ENVIRONMENT

by

L. DAVISON

All things being possible in the cosmic order of events, Nature can just as easily build a computer as a human being. Inevitably, however, she is always a harsh mistress.

ASPECT OF ENVIRONMENT

THE throaty hoot of a klaxon shattered the stillness of the compartment. Brandt swore under his breath and thumbed a switch. The ensuing silence was thick with accusation.

Spengler's rusty voice came from the dim hinterland of the navigation console.

"You over-rode a computer course-reject signal there, Brandt. They'll break you for that if we ever get home."

Brandt continued to gaze into the softly glowing radar globe. The computer logged a formal protest and chattered out a copy on to his desk. Somewhere in the ship a thruster-servo ran a heading-error to ground and hummed to a standstill.

"I didn't expect you to approve," he observed without turning round.

He took Spengler's criticism for granted. It was as unailing as the law of gravity.

"You're damned right I don't approve. If we're not careful we'll be burning our underwear for fuel to get back. That machine doesn't bluff, you know. We should be heading for Earth instead of the opposite end of the goddamn galaxy."

Brandt leaned his stocky, white-overalled frame back in his chair and took a controlled breath. Sometimes it was difficult to make allowances for Spengler. Difficult to distinguish how much was due to cussedness and inherent Jeremiah-ness, and how much to the bug Spengler had picked up way back on the planet of that uncharted star. Other times he felt more pity than anger at the gradual erosion of the man's stability by the microbe so unexpectedly thriving in an alien bloodstream.

"We're chasing that radiation. You know the terms of reference of this expedition as well as I do."

"They don't include marooning ourselves in space. A fat lot of good, even if we found intelligent life, to finish up

without fuel to warp through on the home journey. We'd be dead of old age before we got back. You don't even know the source is inside the galaxy."

"No," Brandt admitted. "It's a hunch."

Spengler's fibrosed vocal chords turned his snort into a wheeze.

"It could just be hydrogen static. And any captain who backs a hunch against his shipboard computer should be relieved of his command."

Brandt scowled, then turned at last to meet the malice in the navigator's eyes.

"The Space Commission might discipline a captain for an over-ride, Spengler, but a crewman sure as hell wouldn't sell for dog-meat when they'd finished with him for mutiny. You just remember that."

Spengler's hooked nose quivered in white-tipped fury, then he insolently turned his back. Brandt glanced across to the communications bay where his other crew-member stood, black phones clipped over her ears. Her preoccupation with the radio gear was too elaborate to be genuine.

His gaze lingered involuntarily on the dark silky cap of hair and the skin-tight curves of her overalls. Olga's neutrality was dogged. But somehow he could never resist trying to breach it. Nor could Spengler for that matter.

Somewhere between Alpha Centauri and this toe-end of the galaxy, Olga had changed imperceptibly from a pinch-faced, crew-cut astronaut, into a woman. It was something more than the long-grown hair and filled-out curves; something maybe to do with the men themselves. Brandt wasn't sure. But he was sure that here in deep space a three-scientist team had suddenly become an old-fashioned terrestrial triangle.

"What's your opinion, Olga?"

He watched her take off the phones and shake back her hair with that uniquely feminine gesture. Her smile was placating, non-committal. The large, slightly slanted eyes were limpid, and black as burnished coal.

"I don't know," she said softly. "We can hardly afford not to track the signal, can we? On the other hand, I can see Spengler's point of view."

Brandt turned back to the globe. He wished he could break that damned Solomonlike impartiality of hers.

He noticed Spengler start to scribble in his log-book. An irrepressible spark of ill-humour made him snap out a request to Olga for a frequency check. From the corner of his eye he saw Spengler quickly cover his face so that he wouldn't see the lilac-coloured flickering of the neons.

Spengler had to be careful about rhythmic stimuli. Flickering lights in particular could send him into epileptic-type seizures; bug-storms, as they'd come to call them.

"Still 10-34 Mega-hertz," Olga reported. "Strengthening quickly—too quickly for inverse-square effect at long range."

Brandt nodded. "Could be a rotating polar-pattern with a lobe swinging across us."

He felt slightly ashamed at his childish impulse to scare Spengler. The navigator began to scribble again now that the matrix of neon lamps was frozen at the f-count.

Brandt studied the build-up of instrument readings. At first only the ship's auto-correlator had detected a trace of order among the electromagnetic clutter of the galaxy. It had been some time before a feeble corresponding whistle had heterodyned through the rushing voices of the stars.

It was a promise of what they'd hunted through the Milky Way for over two years. In one planet-fall after another they'd waded through soups of not-quite-yet life, or uncovered relics of civilisations which might have died before the Earth was born. The satisfaction of Man's craving to gossip with an intelligent neighbour across the galactic garden wall was so much a question of timing.

It was paradoxical that Nature, which seemed inevitably to bring forth living things, seemed hell-bent on murdering its offspring. The forces of the Universe were as blind to the annihilation of life as to the rape of matter at the heart of a supernova. Sooner or later the unsurvivable aspect of environment was bound to appear, even if only in the ultimate heat-death of the cosmos.

Brandt had no belief in a guiding genius; to him, fate was a complex of mathematical probabilities: the chances of a transistor malfunction—or the explosion of a star.

He reclined his chair for a few minutes rest. He closed his eyes and tried to remember Aileen. Twenty-six Earth months and a great many light-years away he had been in love with Aileen. It all seemed so remote. In the long interstellar watches he had been shocked to discover that he could no longer recall her face. The features kept forming in his mind inextricably overlaid with Olga's smile, or Olga's eyes, or Olga's silk-black hair. Olga was here—now, the origin of a local and completely independent co-ordinate system.

Unconsciously he touched the leathery patch of scar tissue on his hard-bitten face. He'd got that when Spengler had opened a star-side heat-screen without warning. It might have been accidental, it might have been a bug-storm; but it just might have been bloody green-eyed jealousy over Olga.

He put his chair upright again. Rest, to a ship commander, was just a joke-word meaning time to finger over his problems.

The signal on to which they were homing was producing an increasing howl from the loudspeaker. He turned again to look at Spengler, who had stopped writing and was staring at Olga with a kind of hypnotised concentration. He'd sometimes caught himself doing the same thing. She had an unconsciously provocative way of standing, one leg slightly kneed in and her weight pushing out the opposite hip. Or was it unconscious?

His voice was sharper than it need be when he spoke.

"Found anything charted on this heading yet, Spengler?"

It was several seconds before Spengler responded with a slight swing of his head, like a man returning from a distant place. His fingers moved automatically over the keyboard of his console. The computer concerned a minute corner of itself with a co-ordinate search, and twitched results up on the data panel.

"There's a small system charted," came the surly reply. "Near the edge of our bearing cone-of-uncertainty."

"Signal still increasing quickly," Olga reported.

Brandt leaned forward. At last he allowed himself to feel excitement.

"Something's beginning to show up in the globe."

He studied the tiny pinpricks of light which represented in microcosm the sun-system just coming within radar-range. He waited long enough for the computer to digest the orbits, then twisted the time-scale knob. Immediately the pinpoint satellites began to circle the slightly brighter parent body in a speeded-up working model of the system.

"Six planets," he observed. "No moons. Radio fix settling on one of the small inners. It doesn't look very big."

Olga nodded emphatically. "That's our source all right. And the strength's rocketing. Verifies the rotating pattern, I think. But the noise level is coming up too."

Brandt moved his head in acknowledgment, and absently fingered his cheek. He was pleased they'd run down the source, but his hopes sank as data accumulated. The planet appeared too small to sustain an atmosphere, never mind a civilisation.

The ship streaked like a splinter of light towards its quarry. Brandt stared a moment longer then made his decision.

"Put us into a survey orbit on that planet," he instructed Spengler.

He strapped himself into landing position and prepared for the crushing weight of deceleration on his body.

They curved off the approach hyperbola and slipped into a parking ellipse. Suddenly the ship faltered, picked up, then faltered again; like a car engine at full throttle intermittently missing on all cylinders. He became aware of Olga yelling across the cabin.

"Field-strength meter's off scale. There are a lot of noise spikes coming through now too. This thing is fizzing like an electromagnetic cracker."

Spengler followed up in a choked voice. "The computer's gone nuts—those pulses must be getting through the screening and jamming the programme circuits. Get on to——"

Brandt had anticipated him. He'd already snapped to manual control.

The ship slanted steeply against the pale disk of the planet. He feverishly fought a developing axial roll. There

wasn't even time for a complete orbit before swooping on to a perilous landing trajectory.

His palms sweated as the ship hurtled backwards against the thrust of its main jets. At 5,000 feet he thought they were doomed; at 500, that they might survive with crippled bodies. When the ship crashed on to its tripods and bot-tomed the hydraulic rams he was astonished to find him-self still connected and functional.

Olga's couch puffed air softly from between the foam interstices as she unstrapped her petite body and swung her legs over the side.

"Nice flying, Captain," she observed shakily.

Spengler grimaced sourly at the compliment. He levered his bony frame upright and began to check instruments.

"That braking run was too damned extravagant. You've reduced us to less than critical fuel mass." The dry cough wracked him. "I knew you'd kill us all in the end, Brandt," he blazed. "I told you——"

The cough seized him again and left him purple-faced.

Brandt bit his lip and glanced at the gibbering data panels. The problem of fuel seemed almost academic. The computer was paralysed as long as they were near the planet's radio-jammed surface. They couldn't even start take-off routine without it.

"We're not dead yet," he said.

"We might as well be," Spengler retorted bitterly. "What are we supposed to do now?"

"Routine procedure," Brandt replied tightly. "Telescopic. Radiation survey. Probe-samples. Robo-track. You know the drill. First real job is to locate the radio-source."

"What are we going to do with the information—chisel it on our gravestones in this God-forgotten place?"

"First of all, we're going to get it," Brandt said levelly.

Olga came from the provision store with meal packs. "No reason why we should go hungry while we're doing it."

If she was scared she was hiding it well. She handed the packs to them; boldly to Spengler, shyly to Brandt. It was a phenomenon he had marked before. Her sexuality had a chameleon-like adaptability, depending for its mood on whether the background was himself or Spengler.

The navigator took a mouthful of food and turned sulkily to the sampling equipment. Olga shook her head at the saturated field-strength instruments.

"I doubt whether the robo-track will be any good. This interference will kill the radio-control."

"Try it," Brandt suggested. He was preoccupied with the problem of escape and survival. In this case he saw no reason for optimism.

Steel arms lowered the robo-track to the powdery ground. Olga viewed the tele-screen hopelessly. The tractor ploughed a couple of crazy circles then butted into one of the ship's legs and ground to a halt.

"Sorry," she apologised.

Brandt grunted as he swivelled his telescope over the grey crystalline plains outside. It was dusk. An incandescent sliver of the planet's sun showed on the sharply curved horizon. Readings soon confirmed that it was neither rising nor setting.

"Axial spin synchronous with orbital rotation," he murmured. "I wonder why. There can't be any tidal effect like with our Earth-Moon system. This place is certainly ocean-less—nothing but a few extinct volcanic craters and some meteorite pitting. Any results from the analyser yet?"

Spengler ripped a printed sheet off the machine and thrust it wordlessly at him. He scanned it quickly. Surface composition: high silicon, trace silver, indium, arsenic. No micro-life.

He passed the sheet to Olga. "Any fix on the radio-source?"

"It seems non-directional now—or rather omni-direc-tional. We're a fraction below the equator, and, if anything, I should say there's slightly more radiation from the nearer pole. Any ideas?"

Brandt shook his head and abandoned the telescope.

"Could be internal activity, I suppose; though I can't imagine what kind. I've got a g-check by the way. This planet's got a remarkably low average density."

Olga's puzzled frown gave her face an almost childlike appeal, so different from her grim-lipped dedication at the

beginning of the expedition. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

"We'll take a look outside."

He called over his shoulder to Spengler, who doubled as flight engineer. "Spengler! Break out a couple of propulsion units. Olga and I are going to explore."

"Why not me?" Spengler demanded.

"Because Olga's the communications and electronics expert. She's the one I need first."

"What do I do meanwhile?"

Brandt faced him wearily. "Try reading your standing instructions. There's plenty to keep you busy."

"How long are you expecting to be?"

"If we're not back in six hours start take-off drill for a standby observation orbit."

"And how the hell am I supposed to do that with a computer gone crazy?"

Brandt reflectively thumbed the pad of tissue on his cheek. Why did he have to do that practically every time he looked at Spengler?

"In the event," he said drily, "you'll be in command of this outfit. That'll be your first problem."

Spengler made a disgusted sound and slammed out of the compartment. Brandt ignored the tantrum. Olga was studiously looking somewhere else, as usual when there was a clash. He signalled her to put on her spacesuit as soon as she glanced round, and began to climb into his own. Interference was massive, but eventually they found a frequency which was manageable.

There were some ill-tempered bangs from the direction of the equipment store, the sigh of gas, and the clang of cylinders.

Brandt would have liked to make peace—there could be many unexpected ways of dying on a strange planet. But Spengler wore a rigid expression. He stubbornly avoided Brandt's eyes. With ill grace he dumped his gear down in front of him, then moved with exaggerated attentiveness across to Olga.

Suddenly there was a low rumble and without further warning the compartment heaved. Crew and equipment

slid in a heap across the alloy decking. The ship rocked over and fetched up with a reverberating clang. It was a struggle to disentangle themselves and regain their feet.

Spengler dived for the cylinders and stood looking at them distractedly. For a moment Brandt thought he was going into a bug-storm.

"It's all right," he soothed. "It wasn't your fault. There was a groundquake. The gear isn't damaged."

He detached the cylinders from Spengler's reluctant fingers, and studied the anguished features.

"Shall you be all right?"

Spengler seemed to recover abruptly. He brushed Brandt's hand aside. "You needn't worry about me."

Brandt compressed his lips. He fitted his own breathing cylinder and clipped on the propulsion unit, then he checked Olga's. He motioned to her to enter the airlock.

Motors whined and the lock enclosed them. The capsule slid down the thick steel thigh of Number 2 leg and let them out at its foot. A small avalanche of silicon scree was trickling to a halt after the passage of the ground tremor. The ship was keeled over at about thirty degrees to the vertical, balanced against a small escarpment of rock. Brandt radioed Spengler and saw his face appear at the tilted observation panel.

"OK?"

The navigator's voice came hollowly through Brandt's helmet-earpiece. "What price take-off from this position?"

"Sit tight," Brandt told him curtly. "We'll be back."

He wondered how much longer he could put up with Spengler's remorseless hostility. The trouble was that short of physical violence there wasn't much he could do except threaten Spengler with a reckoning back home. And that was a pretty hollow threat at the moment. Then there was the difficulty of knowing how much allowance to make for the bug.

He pushed aside his irritating thoughts. The next few hours were his—his and Olga's. Away from Spengler. Getting away from Spengler was like taking off a hair-shirt. His heart faltered at the sight of Olga's wide black eyes behind her face-glass. Only when they'd been alone had he caught

that curious look of intimacy. He couldn't find the word for it; melting, inviting, admiring, speculative. Perhaps an amalgam of all four—and others. He wondered whether she was the same with Spengler.

She nodded in response to his "Ready?" Their jets raised grey dust-devils as they lifted off and accelerated towards the crater pocking the star-pricked horizon. Spengler's voice crackled over the headsets as they manoeuvred on the time-scarred rim.

"You may be interested to know there was a 0.1 per cent g-change after that groundquake."

Brandt hovered and looked back. "The ship's moved. That rock mass might be affecting the g-reading."

"Do your sums again," came the sarcastic retort.

Brandt shrugged and set himself bobbing on his jets. He busied himself stabilising then drifted down to the black mouth of the central pipe. Spengler was right of course, but offhand he couldn't think of a satisfactory explanation.

The funnel of the old volcano was pitch-dark. Olga fiddled with the portable D-F set as they sank steadily downwards. The temperature stayed virtually constant—even when they'd descended past the two-thousand foot level. After some time, Brandt touched Olga's arm with encased fingers.

"Do you see light?"

"Yes—sort of reddish glow."

He nodded. "Cold light. My thermal detector registers nothing."

Cautiously they reduced jet-pressure and began to sink again down the crystalline shaft. The descent towards the ruby flush of the interior seemed never-ending.

Quite suddenly the walls fanned out into dim red infinities. The interior was like some vast rough-hewn furnace, curiously heatless. The inside surface of the planet presented an inturned vista like an ocean petrified in upheaval; whorled and corniced as a fantasy sculpted in blood-soaked sandstone. The weak red light suggested rather than revealed mighty natural structures towards the remote centre of the tiny world.

"This planet must be like an eggshell," Olga breathed.

"No," he corrected, "there's quite a bit of central mass. We've still got positive g."

She waved her hand in acknowledgment and drifted away to examine the strata. Brandt explored the eerily lit ground, adjusting his propulsion unit to hold him against the pull from planet-centre. The light seemed to emanate from countless pinpricks in the crystalline surface. He noticed Olga poring over the D-F set.

"Found anything?"

She shook her head uncertainly. "The thing that's been puzzling me is that this 10-Meg radiation seems all around us—not from any particular direction. As though it were a distributed source in the strata."

Brandt frowned. "Make anything of it?"

"Not yet." She gestured at the rock. "But do these pricks of red light remind you of anything? Gallium-arsenide junction emitters for instance?"

He whistled. "Recombination radiation—natural junctions?"

"Why not?"

"Odd—but possible," he agreed. He felt a tingle of excitement. "And you remember the analyser results—high silicon, trace arsenic and indium. What does that put you in mind of?"

"Transistors."

"Exactly! I suppose there's no reason why you shouldn't get naturally occurring p-n-p junctions. In fact considering the assortment of favourable elements in this place it might be more surprising if you didn't. In a billion random combinations you might even get groupings that formed an oscillator. 10-Meg frequency—maybe?"

He could see her dithering between scepticism and revelation. "What about the noise-spikes?"

"Easier still—once we've got that far. Considering the infinite possibilities, you'd probably get a mixed bag of the whole range—amplifiers, bi-stables, triggers..."

Olga's eyes sparkled. "If so the entire zone could be whirring away like an electronic maniac. Mother Nature's original monolithic circuit. I think you're right. But why a

ro-Meg dominant? By the same token you'd expect a white-noise spectrum."

"A fundamental frequency might emerge," he said thoughtfully, "if there were some sort of purpose for it."

"Oh, come on," she ribbed him. "I thought teleology went out with the Greeks."

"I'm thinking more of evolution than teleology. I——"

He broke off as the rock under his hand trembled, then shook violently. Somewhere in the remote red distance there was a ponderous movement, like a mountain-range grinding overland. When the shaking stopped, Olga circled towards him.

"What's going on in this place?" she whispered.

He touched her arm reassuringly, although his stomach felt like ice at what he thought he'd seen in the far interior. The terrain mounted to their left in a series of rocky bastions towards a tremendous mineral mass bulking away to planet-centre.

"I don't know," he said cautiously. "But I'd like to bet there's been another g-change after that little lot. Can you raise Spengler for a check?"

"Not from this deep. Why a change?"

He peered into the gloom. "Maybe I don't see so well in this light, but it seemed to me that central formation inclined slightly—angled a bit more off-axis."

She gestured in disbelief. "That thing?" she asked incredulously. "It's like saying you think Mount Everest tilted a bit. Anyway I'm still not with you."

"If it *has* moved," he said, "say slightly away from the spin-axis, the planet's moment of inertia would increase."

Olga nodded with sudden understanding. "That would mean the thing would rotate more slowly—conservation of angular momentum."

"Right. And an apparent g-change because of centrifugal action."

"But 0.1 per cent . . ."

"There's plenty of mass in there," he said. "Maybe the insides boiled out of this planet when it was being born, and left that axial structure. Maybe there's a cleavage. . . . If you're game I'd like to take a closer look."

He saw the flick of fear in her eyes, and hoped his own hadn't been so revealing. He was scared, but he was curious too. And they would never have dared leave Earth if curiosity hadn't been their strongest instinct. He waited for her agreement, then moved off slowly, laying a beta-ray trace as he went.

"We want to be able to find our way back out of this geological meccano set," he grinned.

His half-flippant manner seemed to steady her. Even in this setting he revelled in his monopoly of her—away from Spengler's corrosive jealousy. Sometime before they got back, he'd try to find a way of making her choose.

It took half an hour's drifting over the riven landscape before the massive central pillar began to loom close in the ruby half-light. They picked their way round an amphitheatre of transparent quartz panels, polished by some unknowable process in the planet's youth. He pointed to a place on the far side where the sullen light was stronger.

"Those quartz formations are providing a focusing effect, like a set of lenses."

"You could be right about this mineral column—if it is a column. There's a cleavage at the base that looks as though it might go clear through—might be pivoting somewhere down to our right judging by the shape of the gap. It must be miles across."

Brandt jetted closer to the jaws of the chasm. He paused, awed at the enormity of the balanced mass. It *had* to be balanced—he was positive he had seen it move.

"The light is banded on this side. See where it's striking that cliff of crystal on the column? Looks like interference fringes, widely spaced."

"I suppose the light is coherent. That sort of spacing would be possible at the distances involved."

It vaguely registered that there sounded to be an element of tiredness in her voice. It was some time since they'd slept, but he was too preoccupied to feel fatigue himself.

While he pondered there was another tremor followed by an infinitesimal widening of the chasm. In the gasless interior the whole thing was so ominously silent. From the

corner of his eye he noticed a wild fluttering of the ruby bands of light on the scintillating face of the cliff. The movement of the central massif and the fluttering of the bands ceased simultaneously.

The observation catalysed the reaction of two ideas, and the result transfixed him.

He remembered that the planet orbited with the same side always facing its sun, and he saw that it wasn't possible in the face of random inertial variations. It could only be explained in terms of some monumentally scaled control system.

He suggested the idea to Olga.

"You're crazy," she said. "There can't be anything living here."

For her, it was unusually blunt. He felt slightly nettled.

"I mean automatically. Those electronic complexes we saw back there occurred naturally. Take it a step further, blocks of circuits interlinked by conductive strata—iron-bearing rock or veins of silver. You just might evolve an integrated whole that functions in some fashion."

"Sure," Olga yawned. "Like an idiot calculator working out zero over zero."

He impatiently brushed off her scepticism. "We're familiar with learning-circuits, an elementary computer with suitable outputs can extend itself. In a restricted sense it can evolve."

"You think this planet's a computer?"

"Of a kind, maybe. You could imagine operational circuits in the temperate zone, fuel cells in the tropics, and perhaps superconducting memory elements on the frozen side. That ro-Meg could be the clock-frequency best suited to the speed of operation of its basic circuits."

Olga fiddled lazily with her jet-controls, almost disinterestedly.

"It sounds a bit far-fetched. And there are a lot of gaps."

"Of course, but I can suggest ways of filling some of them. You could imagine temperature-sensors in the temperate surface interacting with the light-emitting electronics, moving that central pillar maybe by an amplified piezo-electric effect, until the pattern of bands on the photo-

detector cliff matched some master and indicating that equilibrium had been restored at the sensors because of spin adjustment. The object—if you must have one—would be to keep the semiconductor strata cool and sort of alive. Any servo system in nature is organised to survive at the highest level of complexity it can. Look at living things."

Olga sounded bored and derisive. "You're describing a design, not an accident."

"You're not thinking," Brandt said irritably. "Did anyone sit down to design the human eyeball? Given a few billion years there's no reason why it shouldn't all happen."

"What difference does it make whether this thing floats around space as a dead rock or as a freak computer buzzing away with no other object than to maintain its buzzability?" She finished on what sounded like a stifled yawn.

"You could make similar remarks about the human race," Brandt said wryly. "You might think the dice are loaded against the system ever developing on its own, but the chance of Man evolving must have been orders of magnitude less. Are you feeling all right?"

"Mm."

He felt irritated that he couldn't convince her. He was consumed with the novelty of the idea. To his mind it was the most unique discovery of the expedition. He unclipped his axe and chipped off a knob of friable rock.

"Let's try something."

He lobbed the rock into the complex of red beams. Almost immediately there was an answering ground tremor. The beams wavered, and the monolith stirred.

He stared, fascinated by the stupendous forces brought into play by such miniscule interference. He turned to see Olga's reaction—and his flesh seemed to shrink on his bones.

Her eyes closed and her face was like marble. He became aware of her stertorous breathing sawing through the static of his headset. Her legs were trapped in the stone jaws of the chasm—where it narrowed down sharply. She swung limply under the play of her jets.

His limbs felt cold and leaden as he took her shoulders and shook her. He was agonisingly conscious that he'd

caused the closure of the cleft. He'd thought she was well clear.

Desperately he scanned the immobile, moisture-beaded face behind the mask. Surely she would have cried out first if she'd fainted from pain. He checked her oxygen bottles. One was empty, which was to be expected, and the automatic valve had transferred correctly to the second. Suit-pressure was OK. With nerveless fingers he plugged his analyser unit into her unit. The oxygen content was down below 13 per cent. She'd passed out before she'd got trapped. He should have recognised the symptoms of oxygen-deficiency—the lassitude and stifled yawns.

Quickly he shut off her cylinder and coupled his suit to hers by the emergency umbilical. Her oxygen crept up slowly as her suit shared his supply.

His pounding heart pumped hatred round his body—for Spengler. He'd been watching for him to make some move—not realising that by the time they'd left the ship he'd already made it. He remembered Spengler breaking out the propulsion units and suit cylinders. He remembered too the near-panic in the navigator's eyes when the ship tilted and threw them all into a heap.

That sharp hiss he'd heard from the direction of the gas-store must have been Spengler filling his second cylinder with nitrogen instead of oxygen—but the groundquake had mixed up the units and Olga had got the nitrogen. No wonder Spengler had been frantic with indecision.

He scanned the cliff of photo-receptors. It was impossible to guess what subtle disturbance of the interlaced beams might release Olga. It was an even chance that if he tried it again he would only succeed in crushing her delicately held legs out of existence. He couldn't leave her or she'd suffocate, and if he stayed with her long enough they both would. He began what he knew to be a futile axe-attack on the rock clamping her legs.

He cursed the freak mechanics of the planet, and the treachery of Spengler, but most of all he cursed his own lack of foresight.

In the dim redness, with the terrible pillar looming downwards to planet-centre, he laboured dementedly until

his muscles burned like wires in his flesh. He felt like some condemned mason sentenced to sculpt the roof of hell in a timeless horror of futility. He sweated like a squeezed sponge, and he began to feel the undertow of oxygen starvation tugging at his senses.

He had no conception of how much later it was that the sound of a dry hacking cough came faintly over his headset.

His hot, gritty eyes detected a movement over to his right. Spengler's spacesuited figure drifted indistinctly from the crimson shadows. In one hand he held a beta-ray trail-detector, and in the other a pistol. Spengler couldn't know which of them had got the nitrogen bottle, but he'd come prepared for it being either way.

A fresh rash of perspiration beaded Brandt's forehead. If he left Olga she'd die, and it would be suicide to stay with her after Spengler saw them. He had a matter of seconds. He shook his head against the bar of pain across his eyes.

He still had the axe in his hand, but it was no match for Spengler's pistol. His gaze fell on the glistening cliff of receptors. If he interfered with the system there was still no more than a fifty-fifty chance of freeing Olga and giving himself mobility—if it could be called mobility with one set of jets only to push around both himself and her unconscious body. But the alternative wasn't even a gamble—it was a dead certainty.

He hurled the axe. Its shadow flitted batlike across the receptors. The beams fluttered, and the strata trembled minutely. He froze as the monolith moved infinitesimally towards him and the rock closed down inexorably on Olga's thighs. Her awakening shriek stabbed his eardrums. In imagination he felt the relentless pressure on his own limbs and the swill of death through his veins. If he'd still had the axe he would have smashed her helmet-glass and ended her shrieks. He couldn't even do that for her. He battered it until his fists bled inside his gloves.

Instinct made him spare a glance for Spengler. What he saw made him stop in his tracks. As remotely as in some half-remembered dream, he saw Spengler's limbs go rigid. His eyes were locked on the rhythmic flutter of the beams.

Brandt recognized the instant paralysis of a bug-storm. The man had been caught totally unawares. His jets went out of control and he spun like a catherine wheel into the striped cross-beams of the interference bands.

The navigator's body slammed into the receptor cliff and stuck like a clam. He must have died instantly.

The colossal structure shivered to a momentary halt, then rumbled ponderously into reverse. Brandt felt Olga come free, but there was no time for relief. He sensed that the system was breaking into runaway motion. With Spengler's body flattened against the photo-receptors there was no way of determining the position of the inertia-governing mass. The thing drove frantically in search of an equilibrium it could never find.

Blue crackles of electricity spat among the quartzitic strata under the base of the monolith and great cracks ran like forked lightning through its mass. Boulders broke away from far central regions. In a matter of minutes the work of countless millennia began to reduce itself to rubble.

It was only then that he realised that Olga had stopped screaming. She was in a dead faint, but he caught the tiny whisper of her breathing and without delay jetted away with her in tow through the savagely crumbling underworld.

He was shuddering with strain by the time they reached the bottom of the exit-pipe. His suit was stuffy and humid. The strata shook as though it would burst apart. Over his shoulder he saw rock masses the size of small towns sailing through the gloom, bounding off the inturned mountain peaks and disintegrating against one another.

He noticed that the gravitational pull was reducing and reckoned that the planet was beginning a runaway spin.

The ascent of the pipe seemed as slow as the agony of a diver striking for the surface with bursting lungs.

At the top, the white heat of noon had replaced twilight. It was a murderously hard haul over the powder-swept desert to where the ship lay bobbing gently against the escarpment. Weight was already virtually zero under increased centrifugal action. There were vivid rainbow effects in the bright haze of dust drifting over the ground.

The capsule slid up No. 2 leg and discharged them into the control compartment. He laid Olga on her couch. She was still alive, but he could see from the distorted ruin of her suit-legs that there was nothing he could do to save her. Her closed eyes had the tight-drawn look and her breath rustled in her throat.

He gazed down at her encased head. It seemed fantastic, and somehow tragic, that suddenly all he could feel for her was compassion. He saw only the original Olga—just a pinch-faced, crew-cut spacewoman who'd grown her hair and put on weight.

Olga had merely reacted to the peculiar environment to which she'd been exposed. They all had. Everything was a function of environment, in the last analysis. In a sense, everything in the Universe was potentially a factor in the destiny of every other thing—himself, Olga, Spengler, and even the little planet spinning itself to death under his feet. How extremely improbable that men should ever have come the way of this tiny world and interacted with it and each other in quite the way they had.

It was incredible how so often things seemed to happen through the wildest coincidences. And yet in a casual Universe the word "coincidence" had no meaning. Everything that ever happened was inevitable and the Gaussian probability curve was merely the shape of unforeseeability.

Wearily he went about takeoff preparations. The static which had jammed the computer had disappeared with the death of the planet's sun-scorched electronic layers. He would be taking off under zero-g and with considerably reduced mass.

Olga died during the countdown. He eased her body gently into one of the metal storage-canisters and lifted it into the disposal chute. It ejected with a soft pneumatic hiss. He watched it dwindle up into the darkling sky, then settled himself patiently for the rest of the countdown.

The computer checked and plotted and cross-checked for his safe return; on through the shortening days and nights of the speeding planet. He prepared his mind for the loneliness of the long haul home, forcing his thoughts away from the tragedy of Olga and Spengler, projecting them Earth-

wards to the razmattaz of his return, reports to the Commission, reunion with Aileen.

Technically the expedition had failed. But he had been out into the Universe as few men ever would, putting his faith in his instruments and his own quick brain. Somehow he'd never doubted he'd come through. Maybe that had been the fundamental difference between Spengler and himself; he was an optimist, and statistically the angels were on the side of the optimists.

Even Brandt, however, would have acknowledged the occasional treachery of statistics. A statistician might categorically assert that the chances of treading on a banana-skin were negligible—it was while he was helping you back to your feet that he reminded you he hadn't said they were zero.

Near the end of first boost, as the ship was accelerating up to interstellar cruising speed, it collided with a small cylindrical object—and exploded.

Olga's drifting canister constituted a tiny but unsurvivable aspect of environment; a malevolent, gnomelike certitude chuckling so far out on the skirts of the probability curve that neither Brandt nor the computer could possibly have overheard it.

SOUL SURVIVORS

by

LEE HARDING

With an intended (but serious) pun being used in the title, one would be justified in saying that this is a hauntingly memorable S-F ghost story . . .

SOUL SURVIVORS

It was Christmas Eve. Elliot Westerman dined with his family in the one room of his great house respectfully decorated for the occasion. The walls and ceilings had been trimmed with bright-coloured paper streamers and balloons; freshly-fallen snow—by generous courtesy of the Weather Bureau—had formed an attractive crust on the quarter-windows, and from somewhere distant came the patient sounds of carolling.

Of course it was warm inside; and comfortable; and the great wooden table glittered with the priceless cutlery of a bygone age. Overhead a faceted silver sphere rotated slowly, like some beautiful blind bird embalmed in light, and cast a shifting archaic pattern over their smiling faces.

They had dined splendidly, in the manner of their ancestors, and now they dawdled over coffee; such moments were reluctantly squandered. And afterwards there would be games to play and dozens of tiny intimacies to share, for that was what Christmas was all about. It was a time when a festive air gave weight to one's thoughts and communication became a gay but portentous affair.

Elliot watched his children hungrily, and smiled, and basked in their good spirits. It had been a *good* year—in so many ways it had been the *best*—and while it lasted he would enjoy it to the full. He drew sustenance from his children and their innocent delights and courage from their unfettered enterprise.

Anne had turned three last August. She sat on his left, a bustling young lady now, newly aware of herself and building upon the discovery. Her long blonde hair and her disarming blue eyes had always been a source of delight for Elliot; and he adored the way her impatient young lips were always poised to frame some fresh and awkward question that would tax his powers of communication.

Paul sat on his right, somewhat serious for his seven and a half years. Some of the solemnity of the occasion had settled upon his earnest shoulders and Elliot hugged this evidence of burgeoning manhood like a Midas with his gold.

They are growing up, he realised, while we stand still. Not even growing older, not consciously ageing, for such were the miracles of the age, but locked comfortably into this pleasant stasis called middle-aged—the golden autumn of living.

Dorothy smiled at him across the table. She reached out with one hand and rested her long white fingers next to his. Something priceless flowed between them and Elliot understood the nature of peace.

She was proud and she was content, she was the very summa of his life. Why, it seemed only yesterday when they had clung together with the ardour only youth could summon; and now that they had coasted quietly into these warm shoals of middle-life, it seemed that she had—not so much grown older—but added something vital to herself in the ten short years they had been together.

Sometimes he regretted the postponement of such luxury, the necessities that had made him place marriage and family some time ahead so that an empire might prosper. Tonight he was conscious—not only of the miracle of children—but of the enormous gulf between their burgeoning springtime and his sedentary autumn.

But there was always Dorothy to draw them together.

"The programme will begin shortly, Elliot," she reminded.

Of course! He had forgotten. What was Christmas Eve without the trappings and the traditions? Tonight the programme would be coming from some crumbling old cathedral in Utrecht; it promised to be even more spectacular than usual, with massed bands and choirs and an enormous number of celebrities. They must not miss the opening...

"I'm sorry, my dear," he apologised. "I had forgotten."

Paul's eyes lit up anxiously. "Can we watch too?"

But of course they must! Wasn't this *their* time above all?

Anne's little mouth hung open, her own question stalled by her brother.

Elliot smiled. "I'll switch it on," he said, and got up from the table. He had moved half-way across the room before he realised his mistake. He had allowed the excitement of the occasion to carry him away, and that was always a danger. He really would have to be more careful.

He stopped, turned round, and looked back to where he still sat with his family.

Dorothy was speaking with affection of last year's programme, and he was listening attentively. Her hand still rested next to his, a touching cypher of time past. Paul was mischievously but discreetly tapping his sister's foot with his own underneath the table.

Little devil.

Elliot moved slowly back to rejoin them. He sat down with himself but this time felt uncomfortably self-conscious about the insubstantial image he wore; he found it difficult to regain rapport. He closed his eyes and listened to their conversation and tried to recapture the precious mood of the evening but it seemed to have escaped. Something had upset the delicate equilibrium; he really should be more careful. But then . . . it had been such a marvellous evening. It was sometimes easy to forget. So terribly *easy* . . .

Later, when the moment was *right*, he watched himself get up from the table and lead his children into the other room; but he did not follow. Instead, he stayed at the table and watched his wife fuss over the remnants of the meal. But he found that he could not recapture the meaning of her movements, something had come between them and it was *himself*.

After a while she left the room to rejoin her family next door, where the wallscreens were already thundering the opening ceremony of the Christmas programme.

Elliot did not move. He felt morose and unsettled, the cold weight of his age weighed down upon him and pressed against the white quarter-windows at his back. The magic of the evening had been dissipated. He felt very much alone and unwanted—and all because of his own carelessness.

But someone was watching. He looked up uncertainly

and found his daughter standing in the half-open doorway. She had a wistful, half-mocking look in her eyes, and there was something frighteningly *old* about her manner. She seemed to be waiting for something, and her lips were pouted in the way he knew persaged some mischievous question. Something strange passed between them; a silent communication that seemed to super-charge the warm air in the room, and then she tilted her head slightly to one side and, with a look of ineffable sadness, moved out of sight and back into the other room.

Elliot felt his hands convulse into tight white fists. His breathing became irregular and the colour drained from his face so that it almost matched the snow on the quarter-windows.

He could not move. Or rather, he did not *want* to move. He was afraid, and he had known such fear before. So he sat unmoving and listened to the occasional ripple of laughter that came from the other room during passages of relative quiet in the programme, and sweat began to break out upon his smooth oily ace. Then voices would boom and ancient music would thunder into the room and he would shake with bitter memories.

Eventually he had to get up. He made his way unsteadily towards the wide wooden doors that separated the two rooms and peered cautiously through the open side.

Of course the room was empty. It had not been programmed. The dining room only reproduced the sounds as they entered—there was nothing to see or hear beyond this threshold.

Still shaking, he made his way back to where the room control was concealed behind the wallboard. He slid back the panel and groped inside until his restless fingers located the proper switches. And then he pressed them *down*.

The silence that slapped him was sudden and brutal. A wind seemed to whip quickly through the dining room and stripped it bare. Elliot closed his eyes and whimpered slightly while the room blurred and began to reform itself; what might have been tears circulated uncomfortably across his eyes. When he opened them again everything was . . . still. The Eve had disappeared.

Everything was normal. The table was bare and unused, a dull swathe of polished wood rimed with dust. The decorations were gone, and the windows gaped at the darkness outside and were uncluttered with fresh snow. Only the fading echoes of carolling still lingered in the air—and something else—a rippling undercurrent of laughter that moved through the empty house for much too long, and never seemed to completely disappear, but hovered like some unvoiced whisper just beyond the threshold of audibility.

Elliot knew that sound well. It was the sound of children. *His* children.

He closed the control panel and strained his ears to catch the elusive and unprogrammed sounds that infested the house; but he could find none. The roar of his own blood in his ears drowned everything out. But they would come back . . . later.

So he made his weary way upstairs, where strange sighs pursued his thoughts and lapped at his mind, and scurrying unseen things moved insidiously through the darkened rooms.

And through all that long and restless night he did not sleep.

Promptly at nine o'clock the next morning the district manager of Home Memories materialised in Elliot's reception cubicle. He was a dour little man with an unpleasant face and a shiny black suit, his shoulders shuddered briefly as if they alone were responsible for reorganising his dissembled atoms.

"I find all this difficult to understand, Mr. Westerman," he complained, stepping briskly from the cubicle. "We sent a servomech over last week. It found everything in order."

"Then your servomech is a fool."

There was no need for Elliot to fume. Home Memory was a subsidiary of Automech, a large slice of which had belonged to him since he had attained majority. It had served to ensure his wealth and independence, and although he was in semi-retirement he still presided as official Chairman

at the twice-yearly board meetings. So he had some considerable weight to apply.

The District Manager, whose name was Bolton, looked uncomfortable. "Hmm. Oh, very well, then. Perhaps we had better begin with the main unit. . . ."

They went downstairs, Elliot leading the way. The basement was dark and felt musty, and that was strange because the humidity was supposed to be regulated. He made a mental note to have the conditioning checked as well.

The disagreeable little man palmed a switch in the wall and a whole section of it slid silently to one side. The sightless face of the main memory control unit glared at them. Bolton produced a key and waved it before the appropriate cell.

"I just can't understand it," he complained. "Nothing like this has ever happened before. . . ."

Which was probably correct. But then not many units were as elaborate or as costly as Elliot's, and although the more popular portable Memory machines had been around for nine years it was only reasonable to assume that, from time to time, a Memory as intricate as Elliot's would require servicing. If only the malfunctions were not so insidious and frightening. . . .

A dark cavity opened before Bolton. He reached inside the unit and pressed a switch. Soft light flooded the interior and showed a narrow corridor winding off into the guts of the machine.

Before stepping inside Bolton had a flash of intuition. He stared at Elliot. "You know, it could be spill-over. When that happens you get what we call a 'ghosting' effect—one layer of electrons merges briefly with another. It doesn't happen very often but it is possible." And it was something he could recognise if he saw it. He stepped through.

Elliot swallowed nervously. He didn't know what to think. All he wanted was for the Memories to function properly again so that he could enjoy the company of his family without the recurring malfunctions that made Memories untenable.

It took Bolton less than twenty minutes to complete his cursory examinations. To Elliot that seemed hardly long

enough to have checked anything. But the little man seemed sure of himself; in his position he could hardly appear less.

But he seemed more deeply perplexed than before.

"Well, *I* don't know, Mr. Westerman. Everything seems to be in order. . . ."

"The hell it is!" Elliot exploded. His hands were shaking and he fed a cigarette to his mouth to conceal the fact. "Is that what you're paid for—just to walk in here and tell me that everything's all right, when I know damn well it isn't?"

The little man bristled. "Now, look *here*, Mr. Westerman. . . ."

"No. You look. Either you find out what's wrong with this thing or you rip it out and replace it. Do you understand?"

Whatever Bolton had been about to say was manfully suppressed. Instead he sighed, shrugged his narrow shoulders, and gestured towards the stairs. "Very well, then. Perhaps you could give me some of your time and run through some programmes? The—er—less personal ones, of course," he was discreet enough to add.

Elliot hesitated. "You think that will prove something?"

"It may. If we *both* see a malfunction then it *will* prove something. . . ."

Elliot led the way upstairs.

For the remainder of the morning they moved from one room to the other while Elliot dialled a succession of carefully chosen memories. But nothing unusual occurred. The tapes played over smoothly; there wasn't even a whisper of sound when the lenses high up in all four corners of the rooms snapped into life and began projecting memories. Each room shimmered briefly as the flux-fields circulated and then took hold of the lifelike images. All the sound systems functioned smoothly; there was no overlapping.

He replayed the Christmas Eve episode, dialling carefully to bring the projectors in at precisely the right moment.

He saw the snow once more upon the windows and heard the distant, patient carolling; the hum of conversation

that had led him so soon into despair. He studied the faces of himself and his family with the bitter-sweet emotion he knew so well. Everything seemed to be in order.

He watched himself take the hands of his two children and lead them into the room next door. He heard the opening thunder of the Christmas programme booming from the unseen wallscreen and he shuddered; but nothing happened. Dorothy fussed over the table for a short time and then went to join them. The room was now deserted. He waited expectantly, but no small blonde head bobbed back into sight; the unspoken dialogue was not repeated.

He cancelled the memory.

Bolton shook his head. "Well, I just don't *know*, Mr. Westerman. Everything *seems* to be in order."

It was an unpleasant situation. Memory units had their own peculiar idiosyncracies—such as running in reverse when the mood took them, and spraying multiple images for no good reason, but he had never before come across anything quite like the malfunctions Elliot complained of. And until such time as he actually saw such malfunctions there was very little he could do. Still, he must make some effort to appease.

"Tell you what we'll do," he said, brightening considerably. "We'll begin by replacing all the circuitry." He waved aside Elliot's protests. "Yes, yes, I know: there must be *miles* of them in here, nevertheless it must be done. Then if there are any more malfunctions we will have to look elsewhere. I'll have some servomechs sent over tomorrow. The whole job shouldn't take more than a few hours. . . ."

Before he left he returned to the basement and deactivated the circuits throughout the house. Now only a residue of current trickled through the main Memory unit, holding it in readiness.

"I wouldn't use it again until the new circuits are installed," he cautioned. "But everything should be all right after that. . . ."

But Elliot wasn't listening. A nagging doubt kept insisting that these were only half measures and that the real problem lay elsewhere.

He showed the little man to the transmat—the sprawling

design of the house made it easy for strangers to lose themselves—and saw him inside the cubicle. "Thank you," he was magnanimous enough to mumble. But something in his face—perhaps it was the lines of strain too deeply etched in these days of advanced medicare and physical rejuvenation—prompted Bolton to essay a small concern.

"Do you live here alone?"

Elliot nodded. "Yes. I live here . . . alone."

The door slid shut. A red light blinked four times and then went out. Elliot knew that Bolton's corporate atoms had been broken down and pushed through some *other* space and reassembled at whatever point of arrival he had selected.

If only it had always been as reliable.

He somehow saw through the rest of the day, and that evening he drugged himself heavily and dragged himself into an uneasy slumber. He had obeyed the little man's instructions—he had not touched the Memory controls. And yet the house seemed thick with presence, as though the very walls remembered now that the clever circuits slept.

Sometime during the night he was awakened by some sounds his sluggish mind could not easily recognise; the sedatives had so enclosed his mind that it was several long minutes before he could separate the individual strands of dream and reality and tell one from the other.

It was not completely dark in the bedroom. A subtle night-light illuminated the walls, reassuring to a mind that woke much too often from a troubled sleep.

Elliot worked his eyes awake and listened.

It was a whispering that had disturbed him, a whispering charged with familiarity. It was intense and urgent, like lovers communicating.

He did not move. He *could* not move. Fear had fastened him to his bed and he wanted to will away those frightful sounds.

Oh, they were so *soft*, just a sussurrus of sounds to disturb the night, so gentle that his coarse breathing could drown them out. It was a whispering that came and went in

waves, sometimes rising to a high-pitched ecstatic peak and then dropping down into an intense quiet that tugged at the muscles of his heart. The bell-like sound of a woman laughing drove like a sword into his chest; it began to ache, and he groaned, aloud, and would have writhed but for the fear that held him.

He was wide awake now; the house seemed to hum malevolently with life. And yet that was not possible. The circuits were switched off. He had not touched anything. He . . .

Damn Bolton! Damn them all! Couldn't they get *anything* right? Couldn't they fix . . .

The bedclothes shifted—or was that his own spasmodic movements? The whispering changed in pitch and intent, the threshold sounds of deep erratic breathing surrounded him.

He forced himself to look around.

Beside him, so close that he could have reached out and touched them, two ghostly figures made love. They seemed unaware of him, so lost were they in their communion. Their movements did not disturb the bed, their bodies dissolving and reforming as he watched; he could see quite clearly here and there *through* the insubstantial projection.

He relaxed a little. Of course, that's what it was. Some of the residual current must have trickled into the circuits.

But what had activated the projectors in this room? Surely he couldn't have done it in his sleep? Surely . . .

He was no longer sure of *anything*.

He could hear them laughing. It was their love-play that had woken him and now he wondered what on earth he should do. Phone Bolton? At this time of night?

He tried not to look too closely at the ghostly figures, but pain and curiosity kept drawing his attention to them. The woman was, of course, Dorothy, but a Dorothy of another age, another time. And the man was himself. The scene that the circuits had spilled out in this mysterious fashion was a Memory of their honeymoon eve, now more than nine years ago and . . .

But how had he known that? How had he know it was *that* night out of so many? How had he?

He had been younger then. And Dorothy . . . her body wavered and dissolved, he almost lost her.

Dorothy . . . my darling.

It was impossible not to touch, to try and recapture that flesh, and so, knowing full well his folly, he reached out with one nervous hand and groped for hers. But her arms were locked around that other Elliot and he could not reach her.

But . . .

But . . .

He clasped her fingers! And held them. And felt her flesh all cold and lifeless under his. For a moment they were locked thus, and then he felt her hand withdraw.

He looked up and into her eyes.

And she looked into his own, and smiled.

He began to shake. He pulled away, but her ghostly eyes followed him and mocked and the face of that other Elliot seemed to share her secret humour. He leaned forward and whispered something to her. She smiled, and it was a bell-like sound. A sound he knew well.

He watched them resume their lovemaking.

No!

He groped his way out of bed and flooded the room with full-light. He looked back at the tumbled bed and, for a moment, thought that he could still discern a faint nimbus of the smiling couple. And then they were gone.

Behind him and all around him he sensed the growing pulse of the house. It was alive and filled with unfettered memories. Without looking any further he knew that the rooms would be crowded with the pale wraiths of his under-powered memories; they had climbed out of the walls like ghostly woodworms and all they could do now was prowl restlessly and without purpose through the empty house.

The walls sighed and whispered and made noises like a weeping cistern. He closed his eyes and began to whimper; he felt like a caged and frightened animal.

He felt the house suddenly gather itself into an enormous silence. A single moment of time seemed to hang poised before him, waiting for some calamitous event.

And it came.

From somewhere downstairs the tortured scream of an explosion shattered the silence. It raced upstairs like a demented banshee and shook the walls like so much flimsy paper. The concussion threw Elliot screaming to the floor; the room reeled drunkenly around him and the terrible sound echoed and re-echoed around the corridors of his mind.

He screamed again, and he kept screaming until he had cried himself into silence and both he and the house were at rest.

He felt no desire to go downstairs and survey the damage, because he knew he wouldn't find anything. The explosion belonged to the past, and there would be no debris to probe through, only the pale and insubstantial evidence of that other time he wanted so much to forget.

And the house wouldn't let him.

If only Bolton had been here. If only that officious little man could have heard all this! If . . .

But everything was quiet now. He could relax. But for the rest of that terrible night he did not sleep.

The servomechs arrived shortly before noon the next day, just as Bolton had promised, and while Elliot sat bleary-eyed and weary in the main room, drinking copious quantities of black coffee, the eager little machines scurried around the house, ripping open great sections of the walls and exposing the raw veins and arteries of his memories and removing them, tearing them out with their delicate metal claws and replacing them with fresh copper wiring and moulded connections.

There wasn't an item of the vast pseudo-neural network that escaped their attention. The tiny glass lenses of the hidden projectors were removed and new units substituted. The individual room controls were removed and fresh units installed. The flux-field dischargers were drained and re-filled. The entire operation took just under two hours. Elliot found it impossible to follow the activities of the busy little machines; they moved much too fast for the human eye to follow, scuttling through the house like enormous beetles.

When they had finished the foremech trundled over to Elliot and intoned, "Our programme is complete. Please contact Administrator Bolton if there are any further difficulties."

Elliot nodded. He disliked the impersonal creatures.

The foremech wheeled towards the door. "There will, of course, be a small labour charge," it added, and then scurried off with its fellow workers without waiting for an answer.

Elliot gave them a dour look. *Just let them try to collect!*

In the distance he could hear the transmat cubicle cycle and re-cycle as it pushed them, one at a time, back to their factory where their atoms were casually reassembled.

Elliot stared morosely at the new control panel glistening in the wall. Thinking of transmats led inevitably to Dorothy, and he remembered now that she had thought his plan for installing a Home Memory much too expensive. He had explained to her that, as President of Automech, it wouldn't prove all that expensive to *him*, but he had never been able to convince himself that she had really taken to the idea. Perhaps she had reasons other than the expense, if so then she had never voiced them, and now that she was no longer with him it seemed that there were vast areas of time and space that they had never adequately shared.

He thought his own reasons were sound enough. Most people were happy to record their travels and their singular activities with their portable Memories; only Elliot Westerman saw past the sheer novelty value of the new invention. His was the first Home Memory to be installed, at a time when the cost was prohibitive to all but the elite; and it was true that—seven years after the initial prototype had proved satisfactory—the enormous cost had allowed only a handful to be installed.

With *their* Home Memory there wasn't a second of the past that was not retrievable, within these walls. With a flick of a switch he could recreate any moment that he wished, and the coming of the children had revealed the richness of his investment. *They* were in stasis, but the children grew . . . and grew . . . and grew; that alone had justified to Elliot the enormous cost of the unit.

Until recently. Until that first time—was it really only a few weeks ago?—when the circuits had begun to play up and disgorge misshapen and unwanted memories.

Such things made Elliot uneasy. Only human memory should be so capricious. Only his own unguarded memory could throw up unpleasant and unwanted images to torture him. A thing of wires and transistors should be exempt from such behaviour.

He realised now that it was only since the disaster that the unit had been malfunctioning. And yet Home Memory and Transcontinental had been adamant that there had been no damage to the unit.

Had they been concealing something from him? Could their technicians recognise and take care of the almost invisible damage that such an enormous explosion might have inflicted on the delicate cyborg memory cells?

Of course not. They were not infallible.

If it hadn't been for the disaster . . . so much would have been different.

But these were disturbing thoughts. He felt old and tired and the house had folded its great wings gently around him and, inexplicably, he slept. The armchair was warm and comfortable and there were some things the body remembered that the mind sometimes forgot.

He dreamed. Of a time before this when his wife and his children had moved through this house and the unseen cameras had gorged themselves upon such beauty. Now they moved only when he consciously willed it; when his fingers flipped the proper switches into play and the flux-fields sprang into being and grasped the very substance of their life in these fragmented moments. He had outlived the tragedy of their death and now, whenever he wished, he could bring them back to life, dispel the aching loneliness from his great empty house, see them move and talk and laugh and cry and to be with them, oh! to be *with* them! in a way that few people could. Sometimes they seemed so close and so real that he could *touch* them, but for the most part it was enough to gaze upon them and feast upon their beauty.

But the dream became discoloured. An unwanted injection of remorse despoiled it.

He saw the soundless wave of destruction rip through the vestibule; saw the shattered remnants of the transmat; heard the howling wind tear through the house. Again and again the explosion blossomed in his mind like a gigantic and deadly orchid; always soundless; always more terrifying than before.

In his hands he held the papers that had brought the powerful Transcontinental Transmat Company to its knees. They gave him money—an enormous sum, which he had no use for—and a new cubicle; that had been the essence of their reparation and the limit of his revenge—he could gain no more. And he found that he was not quite big enough nor powerful enough to destroy Transcontinental; and there was nobody who could reassemble the disrupted and dispersed atoms of his dead family and make them whole again.

They had stepped into a Transmat cubicle in a Caribbean hotel. The machine had performed in the usual manner, the red light winked to the waiting world outside that the family had reached their home destination. But they had stepped into oblivion.

It hadn't been the first such disaster. Each new mode of transport brought its own special dangers—the toll of the road had become the toll of the transmats. Fatal accidents were fewer now because the human element had been eliminated; but mistakes still happened. And somebody always suffered.

As Elliot Westerman had suffered. And all they could tell him was that, somehow, for reasons they had been unable to establish from the wreckage, the bodies of his family had failed to reassemble. Oh, they had been broken down all right, and beamed to their home cubicle; this much could be ascertained. But something in the receiver had . . . malfunctioned. It was a popular word with the technocracy. And instead of automatically reassembling the precious atoms the cubicle had contained them as a seething, disorganised energy pattern. Such was the situation when the door of the home cubicle swung open on schedule.

The release of energy had been titanic. With no force fields outside the cubicle to contain the whirling energy the vestibule exploded outwards in one cataclysmic instant. The walls leading through to the basement and into the reception area were vaporised and the concussion cracked walls and ceilings throughout the house. But, because it was isolated by the design of the great building, the main force of the explosion was contained within the small area of the vestibule and the immediate vicinity. What was left was scarcely recognisable.

That had been the first pain. And in his dreams he often relived the horror of those first few days and the spiritual desolation brought about by the long and wearying court action—and the bitter defeat that followed. His return home—and the memories. The memories . . .

In his mind that terrible cataclysm blossomed soundlessly and blotted out his thoughts. The Memory lenses in the vestibule operated automatically and kept a record of arrival and departures of important people; but they had only been able to record a fraction of a second of the terrible explosion before they were crushed into powder by the expanding shock wave.

He had watched it many times since, coming towards him like some blind insatiable monster, and he had even stood alone in the centre of the thing and watched the re-projected room disintegrate and clamped his hands across his ears to keep out the fearful sounds.

His dreams darkened, melted, flowed uneasily back to reality.

He woke.

Standing before him were the ghostly projections of his children. Paul looked very serious; he was standing slightly to one side and a little behind his sister. Anne was studying him with a puzzled and inscrutable expression. The image was so poor that he could not even see the colour of her eyes.

"What . . . what is it?"

The words tumbled from his mouth without thought.

"What do you want?"

But they said nothing. And they did not move. And when

he reached out towards them their images shimmered, and dissolved, and all but went away.

But not quite.

Elliot shook his head. Did he wake or dream? He tried to rise from the chair but some dreadful lethargy weighed him down. Something made him look around and there, standing in front of the closed double doors, was Dorothy. Even at this distance she seemed quite real, much more substantial than the children. A better projection.

But wait a moment—he hadn't instigated any programme. Or had he? There was so much confusion in his mind that he couldn't even recall being asleep; dream and reality had merged.

"Dorothy . . .?"

She too seemed mute. She stood with her hands behind her and leaning gently against the doors. She wore the emerald dress she had been wearing when he last saw her; her head was held high and her expression chilled him.

"Dorothy . . ."

He found that he could move. His stumbling feet carried him across the room until he stood before her, and found the tears in her eyes, and saw the pulse moving beautifully in her throat.

He reached out for her, and at that moment an ineffable sadness suffused her image; it wavered and all but disappeared. He uttered a sharp cry and spun around. There, by the chair, stood the two pale figures of his children.

His mind turned upside down. There was an accusation in their eyes that he could not tolerate. Whimpering, he crossed over to the control panel in the wall and dialled frantically. He would banish them; he would crowd them out. They were not real memories; they were something false and fabricated by this insane machine. He would drown them out.

And he did. The room shimmered and made his eyes water, and then burst into life. He pushed the central command button that activated the memory throughout the house. In the space of half a second the great empty house became crowded with roistering guests.

Elliot found himself in the centre of a room crowded with gaily dressed visitors. It was the evening of January the fifteenth, two thousand and thirty-three. The night they had celebrated the birth of their first child. Dorothy was well and glowing with excitement and they had invited more than three hundred people to the party. They filled every nook and every niche and every cranny of the enormous house; they spilled out of the rooms and down the corridors; the hearty noise of their conversation was a delight. All night long the transmat cubicle had hummed pleasantly about its business, disgorging an endless stream of visitors. It had been a great occasion. One to remember.

Elliot pulled himself together and looked around him. The party was in full swing—he had been thoughtful enough to dial midnight—and the air was heavy with sweat and drink and *talk*; it buzzed noisily around him like an angry swarm of bees. Gracious women adorned his room, so beautiful that they seemed prize creatures from another world, brought here to enhance the corpulent extravagances of their escorts.

But Dorothy outshone them all. He could see her now, seated at the far end of the room like some goddess on a golden throne. But the gold around her was a velvet sofa and she wore no crown—only a vivid scarlet dress that swept into great feathered plumes above her head and slashed magnificently so that her smooth bare flesh could peek out. And although the room was packed with guests there was an area in front of his wife that remained clear and navigable; it was their tribute.

He could not find himself. But his guests were in high spirits and the misty phantoms were nowhere to be seen. The music that rose above the hubbub was gay but not obtrusive; there was something about the laughter and the throbbing rhythms that he found almost infectious. Sometimes one seemed to be not so much an observer but ... a participant. Perhaps that was the danger.

Something of the heated, atmospheric air in the room came across to him; the new circuits seemed to have made a difference, even if the spill-over problem had not been entirely eliminated. He crossed through into another, less

crowded, room. Here the lighting was soft and intimate; the noise from the other room cut off by a soundscreen. Petting couples amused themselves in the agreeable half-light or slouched across the luxurious furniture.

He pressed on, through another doorway and into the musky, heavy atmosphere of booze and laughter. This room was almost dark and filled with soft laughter and heavy breathing!

What strange curiosity had brought him here?

He stumbled against something soft and yielding. It was the edge of a couch, and as he negotiated the obstacle a little clumsily he thought he heard a familiar voice. He looked down at the couple sprawled beside him. He could just make out their faces in the dimness. The man had worked the woman's breasts free from her flimsy dress and was drawing one hand across them in a most possessive manner, while his other arched the woman's back towards him. His breathing was heavy; hers was light and amused; their mouths made sweet sucking noises as they clung together.

And then the man looked up and smiled.

Elliot recoiled. Like someone struck bodily in the face he fell back.

The man on the couch was himself. The woman he did not recognise, could not even *remember*. And they had interrupted their earnest enterprise to mock him, to look at him with their burning eyes.

He opened his mouth to protest but found that he could not speak. Some horror had dried up his tongue.

The woman laughed—it was an icy, dripping sound, not the bell-like notes of Dorothy in heat; not the laugh of ...

Something was happening.

Something had gone wrong.

The projections ...

He turned around and raced back into the main room.

Into chaos. Into a maelstrom of madness where the original memory had become overlaid with disordered spill-overs. The room flickered and jumped strangely; guests moved and merged together and passed through each other

as memories from different times jostled for command of the occasion.

The Memory must have gone mad!

Elliot could not bear to look out upon the drunken images. All he could think of was to somehow find his way down to the cellar and find the masterswitch and cut off this madness.

Sound screeched around him, a bewildering cacophony that made no sense.

He stepped forward.

And something happened—the room became quite still. The chaos disappeared and the projections faded away into barely perceptible residues. Only three figures remained clear and solid and acceptable:

Dorothy, unmoving on her golden throne. And beside her the silent reprimand of his children.

They were all quietly watching him.

He blinked. But they did not disappear. He swore and launched off in the direction of the basement.

And the room jumped into life again, surrounding him with Dorothy's of every look and gesture and dress he could possibly imagine; his children paraded through the room in appearances beginning at the cradle and ending when they had ended. At his feet something crawled: it was his son, his infant son.

He began to cry.

"What is it—what *is* it?" he shouted, and placed his hands to his ears to keep out the truth. "What are you trying to *tell* me?"

But all they did was shimmer and move and crowd around him—the sum of his yesterdays gone mad. Damn the machine!

He lurched forward and ran from the room. And as he fled down the stairs towards the basement there came a cataclysmic sound that threw him to the floor. The walls bulged inwards and shattered, debris flew everywhere but did not harm him, the screaming air shook to the thunder of the explosion.

He screamed and cried out but no one came to save him. He lurched to his feet and pressed on.

Again the thunder and the walls exploded towards him.

Again . . .

And again . . .

And again!

Each time more terrible than the last. Somewhere a memory had become stuck and was repeating itself over and over again—the agony of their deaths.

And who had programmed it, who had asked for it?

He staggered into the basement. He found the control that activated the wall and it slid back. The cold face of the main memory unit stared back at him. He reached for the bright red toggle and threw all his weight upon it.

In a moment some of the madness seemed to leave him. He found that he could breathe easily again. He looked up and studied the dials before him. On one of them a fine wire needle was registering a faint discharge; it was vibrating faintly.

Elliot swore. There was still some residue of current in the accumulators, somewhere. Now what the devil was he going to do now—call Bolton at this time of night?

It had become deathly quiet behind him. He shivered, and, feeling the house gather this small portion of life together and focus it upon this one small room, he turned around to face them.

There were just the three of them. Dorothy wearing the same green dress she had worn on the day . . . the day he had last seen her. And Anne in her crisp pink dress and Paul in his sober grey suit.

They were quietly watching him, and waiting for him to speak, to say something, to act, for they knew that he had begun to understand, even if he was not ready to believe.

He let out his breath in a long, disturbing sigh. "All right," he said, "what do you want with me?"

But they did not, they *could* not, answer. They were projections without life or physical form, but they lived and were conscious of the miserable life that had been thrust upon them. And they wanted desperately to escape.

Their shapes were pale and wavering. They did not have much time. Soon the residue would have been used up and

they would have to wait for fresh current to plunder. Dorothy smiled reassuringly and made her way upstairs, motioning him to follow.

He followed her out into the vestibule. She took his hand and motioned him to silence with her lips. But her form was hardly visible and there was no cold contact to frighten. She gestured towards the transmat cubicle. Then she seemed to concentrate for a moment and her image all but disappeared.

Again the explosion blossomed towards him like some great blind beast. He flinched, but stood his ground, and the walls crashed around him soundlessly. This time it was much less terrifying than before, and that was because of the miserable bit of power they were generating on.

Gradually Dorothy reappeared, wraith-like and insubstantial. She smiled and led the way back into the basement. The images of his children had been dissipated by the necessity to re-project the blast; but their serious little faces bore him no malice, only an intense fatigue.

She took their hands and, with but one small backward smiling glance, walked with them into the face of the Memory. They disappeared from sight.

Elliot frowned. He waited for them to reappear and this they did, but they had become quite ghostly by now and he could barely make them out. They stood quietly before him. And waited.

The tiny needle vibrated strongly on the face of the Memory Unit and they flared suddenly into intense solidity. This took him by surprise, so much so that he wanted to step towards them and sweep them into his arms and ask their forgiveness.

But the miracle did not last. Like patches of snow underneath a hot summer sun they began to fade. They steadied when they reached the point of ghostly presence that must, of necessity, remain their most malleable identity. And then they moved discreetly back against the wall.

To wait.

Next morning the servomechs returned—at his request—and began ripping out the circuits again. Only this time

they were not replaced, and afterwards Elliot went down into the basement to watch the men from Home Memory carefully dismantling the main unit.

"Be careful with those," he said, and indicated the cyborg cells. "They mustn't be damaged."

They understood.

He walked over and placed one hand over the projecting plates. They felt quite warm from where the current had surged, and they suggested a curious softness, almost like a human arm.

He smiled. He felt curiously light-headed, as though some enormous weight had been lifted from him.

What was life? he had asked the technicians. And they had told him that that was a question whose answer would vary with the answerer. But that was not enough. What happens, he had asked them, when you break up a human body into its separate atoms and squirt them to space?

We convert it into energy, they had replied.

Ah, he had said, what sort of energy?

Electrical energy. That explained the explosion and the damage that had eventuated.

I see, Elliot had said. But this house is a vast network of electrical circuits—could some of this energy have been absorbed?

They shook their heads. They did not know. But *something* had interfered with the Home Memory. Something that wanted to get out. Something trapped. And it had called to him in the only way that it could.

Tell me, he had asked, what is a soul?

And they had looked surprised.

I mean, he had said, that when you break down the body into its component atoms, what becomes of the soul? And there *is* one, isn't there—it's the electrical energy that keeps us alive, isn't it?

But even in this enlightened twenty-first century he could find nobody willing to commit himself.

But Elliot did not mind. He knew and understood at last. He would not plunder his family again. Let his critics frown and mumble *remorse* and wag their heads—he had things to do.

He smiled at the carefully packaged unit. "Good-bye," he whispered. "Everything's going to be all right."

He watched them carry the precious cargo of components out to a hovertruck and load them aboard. His heart felt light and joyous again.

The truck moved off. The fresh air stung his face; the forgotten sun blazed down upon the wide and empty streets. The city reared up all around him and beckoned.

He turned and looked around at the house where he had ceased to live, and thought of his family. They could rest now, and he might muse and ponder for the rest of his life on the nature of living.

He moved off briskly down the street, in no particular direction.

Good-bye, his mind kept whispering. *Good-bye* . . .

Dorothy . . . Anne . . . and Paul. They were really gone now. But . . .

He would remember them.

DEATH AND THE SENSPERIENCE POET

by

JOSEPH GREEN

*Plenty of modern drugs produce hallucinations—
but suppose an actual planetary body went on the
equivalent of a LSD kick? Where would be the
reality?*

DEATH AND THE SENSPERIENCE POET

ALISTAIR McALISTAIR felt the prevailing breeze pushing gently against his back as he stared, brooding, at the sombre, darkly colourful vegetation of the great swamp. He and his partner were standing on a long rolling swell in the land, hidden among the stubby, heavy-limbed trees that covered the temperate zones of this very Earth-like planet. The edge of the massive wet area, which they knew from previous air surveys covered several hundred square kilometres, was clearly defined on this side by an abrupt rise to the higher ground on which they stood.

"Ugly mess, isn't it," said Wu Hin. "But at least this steady eastern breeze keeps the smell away from us."

McAlistair glanced at his slight but space-toughened temporary partner and bit back a sharp remark about Wu Hin's lack of aesthetic appreciation. Only a sensperience poet such as himself could be expected to see beauty here. The swamp was dotted with hummocks of solid ground, often connected by grassy ridges of mud. Tall cattails of ochre-green grew in gently waving masses over most of the water, forming a backdrop for the deep purple, scabrous yellow, and light aquamarine plants that dominated the solid ground. Some of these stood twice as high as a man, with broad, fleshy leaves that seemed to grow directly out of a vertical central body. The overall effect was one of subdued but quietly pervading beauty. If he survived this stint as a spaceman and someday returned to designing sensperiences, some of these darkly strong colour schemes would reappear in the visual component, probably in the depression period before the uplift in the third movement.

Occasionally during the previous day they had caught whiffs of a deep, underlying stench from the swamp; it had a peculiarly disgusting quality, like the scent of carrion. For some reason not yet understood by their meteorologist a mild but persistent wind blew steadily from the higher land

towards the watery region, keeping the dry ground relatively smell-free. Only occasional eddies and cross-currents brought the stink to the humans camped a few hundred metres from the swamp's edge.

"My fondest hope is that we find Almeril somewhere on solid ground," McAlistair answered his temporary partner, without commenting on his artistic judgment. "I'd rather look at the swamp than walk in it. And those swamp dwellers turn my stomach."

"That's an atavistic reaction caused by recognition of kinship," Wu Hin said, grinning. He was the survey crew's biologist and it had been his decision that neither the four-legged humanoids they had dubbed the swamp-dwellers, nor the tall, thin, brightly-coloured dryland bipeds they called the flower birdmen, were intelligent. "Alert! There's one now."

McAlistair followed a pointed finger and saw the creature, just paddling into sight from behind a hummock near the water's edge. It was about half the size of a man, covered with coarse, bristly white hair, and surprisingly human in appearance except for the shortened rear legs. The head was an almost round ball, with a small cranial capacity. As the two Earthmen watched unobserved the awkward swimmer reached his goal, a small clump of what appeared to be vegetable matter floating in the open water. They saw the humanoid hands fumble among the cover of fungus plants and emerge with two large eggs, which he quickly washed in the murky water and ate. They did not appear to have solid shells. He cleaned and ate two more, and finished off the nest by locking four against his chest with one arm and slowly stroking towards the hummock with his feet and free hand.

"Must have a mate or kids hid near by," Wu Hin whispered. Survey Crew Three had been camped near this vast swamp for four days now and knew a little about the habits of the more prominent denizens. The swimmer raised his head as he approached land, decided it was safe, and crawled out on the muddy bank. He started around the tiny island to a ridge leading to the next hummock, walking on two legs and one arm. And then the thick growth of purple

and dark red bushes cloaking the centre parted, and a tall lean form covered with scarlet feathers stepped almost leisurely into the open. The shuffling humanoid squalled in sudden fear and turned desperately towards the water, but he was far too late. The thin birdman took three long strides and taloned hands locked closed at neck and crotch. Wire-hard muscles strained as the carnivore lifted its prey and held it, kicking and squirming, as life bled away from the hole a sharp opposing talon had cut into the neck.

McAlistair turned away; violence always sickened him. He saw that Wu Hin, whose profession should have hardened his sensibilities against such reactions, had already turned and started on.

"In a way it seems fair," said the lean biologist after a moment, as they picked their slow way through the heavy undergrowth. "Possibly that nest he robbed belonged to the mate of the male birdman that got him. The females gather light material and build that floating nest to get the eggs away from small animals on the land, since they let the sun incubate them. The swamp dwellers are the only creatures I've seen who can swim and are smart enough to go after them. Evidently they eat enough eggs to keep the birdman population down and the birdmen in turn come into the edges of the swamp and prey on the swamp dwellers. It's a rugged form of direct population control."

"'Naught in nature should have power to sicken'" McAlistair quoted absently, his mind reverting back to their immediate problem. Almeril had become separated from Wu Hin shortly after noon the day before. The alarm had been sounded immediately and when the missing crewman failed to answer communicator calls Crewchief Bain' Goru had ordered McAlistair, waiting at the scout, to activate his search signal. For some reason Almeril's communicator, which should have started broadcasting automatically, had failed to function. There had been nothing to do but start beating the brush on foot, and McAlistair had had to replace Almeril or their effective force would have been reduced to three teams. They had searched the remaining four hours until dark and moved out again with the first light of morning. The urgent questions of what had happened to

Almeril and why his communicator failed to respond to the activating signal, were still unanswered.

McAlistair and Wu Hin continued methodically covering the quadrant assigned to them, moving back and forth from the swamp's edge to several hundred metres inland. They had been instructed not to venture into the marshy ground. If Almeril had disobeyed standing orders and got into trouble there he was probably at the bottom of some stagnant slough, or digesting inside one of the birdman carnivores. Though how a birdman, the largest animal they had seen, could pierce the flexarmour they all wore beneath their clothes remained a good question. The light but impenetrable garment covered a man from forehead to toes, leaving only the hands and face, from eyes to chin, exposed. A body could be crushed inside the suit, but it was virtually impregnable to fanged attack.

The hot blue sun of Achernar climbed swiftly to the zenith and down again to end the nine-hour day. The two men turned back in time to reach camp before the swift-falling twilight compelled them to blunder along in the dark. The three other teams were already in and Carson, the meteorologist, was warming up a meal. McAlistair helped Smyth-Whyte and Mellows erect the charged protective web that enclosed the small scout and their camp and connected it to the ship's power supply. After the meal the men gathered before Crewchief Bain' Goru and made semi-formal recorded reports on the day's search.

After this daily chore was over the tall African leader called the mothership, whose orbit had just brought it within range and dictated a digest for the captain. McAlistair heard him add at the end that they would devote one more day to searching for Almeril and then list him as lost and move camp to the next planned evaluation area, a plateau in the equatorial mountains.

The Earthmen were tired from a day's searching and the night was short; they retired early. McAlistair tossed and turned restlessly in his sleeping bag before finally dozing off, resolutely keeping his mind off the personal tragedy that had driven him into space. But the self-discipline he managed to exert during working hours betrayed him in his

sleep and for the first time in weeks he had a deeply erotic dream. It was based on a memory of the first night he and Carolyn had spent in the honeymooner's hotel on Titan, but was primarily invention. In the dream he composed a sonnet of ineffable beauty to his bride of a few days, their still but joined bodies a symbol of union, their eyes feasting on the greatest beauty in the solar system, the shimmering, ethereal glory of the three rings of Saturn . . . in reality they had shared sex several times and fallen asleep, exhausted by the trip out.

McAlistair awoke in a state of sexual need so strong his body ached. The effect of sensation, experienced as real in a dream but so difficult to recall when awake, lingered a moment. He was a specialist in creating the electronically stimulated sensations that were humanity's favourite form of relaxation, but even he was not immune to the effects of nature's older method. He became aware of an acutely unpleasant olfactory sensation that was assaulting his nostrils; the wind had evidently changed. After a moment, beneath the stronger smells, he caught a faint, delicate whiff of some pleasing fragrance, a haunting scent of flowers. It was gone as quickly as it was detected. Seconds later the stronger carrion odour also vanished and he felt the usual light prevailing breeze on his back.

More disturbed than he cared to admit, the sensperience poet slipped out of his sleeping bag and went into the scout. The sensual memory faded quickly as he walked and after relieving himself in the scout's disposal he returned to bed. He noticed as he crawled between the covers that several of the men around him were lightly muttering or twisting in their sleep, as though troubled by strong dreams.

Next morning Bain' Goru had everyone check his communicator before setting out, including activating each individual search signal from the scout; all performed perfectly. McAlistair and Wu Hin returned to their stopping point and resumed their slow, careful search. Occasionally they saw a gorgeously feathered birdman, or one of the less brightly coloured females, but the carnivores ran as quickly as they were sighted. It seemed unlikely Almeril could have

been physically attacked. Either he had suffered an atypical accident, or there was a hidden menace here they had not yet discovered.

McAlistair found himself lingering each time their search pattern brought them back to the water's edge. There was an almost unholy quietness about the swamp, as though all its life slept in dull stupor throughout the lighted day. The subdued but strong colours of the plants, sometimes forming abstract patterns of odd but pleasing harmony, at others clashing in harsh dissonance, both attracted and repulsed his sensperienced eye. It had something of the lure of death, the call to nirvana, a search for rest, quiet, eternal peace . . .

Strange; he had thought, when he first met Carolyn, that she was one of the most alive women he had ever known and yet she already carried the seeds of death within her. This beautiful swamp with the carrion odour reminded him of his dead wife, at the emotional level where sensperience poets created the controlled dreams that became reality to the person attached to the sensplayer. There was no logical reason whatever for the comparison—Carolyn was darkly pale, midnight-tressed, slim; the plants were all subdued shades of bright colours, without true adorning leaves, squat and thick—but now that the thought had formed he realised it had been lurking in the back of his mind for some time. The swamp had a subtle but definite feel of death . . . and so had Carolyn.

There was one further corollary and McAlistair took the final step that brought him up short facing it. He was attracted to both because he was seeking death himself.

After surviving the psychic shock of Carolyn's suicide McAlistair had found himself unable to create sensperieneces; the well had run dry at an early age. He had fled to the stars, accepting a post as one of several assistant historians on a planetary exploration and evaluation ship. It had been his hope that a life of danger and excitement would help him forget his dead wife. And all the time he had been running from a demon within himself and there was not, and had never been, any possible escape.

At noon they reached a spot where one of the ridges of

mud that often connected several hummocks extended itself to dry land. As they were taking a brief rest Wu Hin's communicator buzzed, on the gencom channel. The wiry biologist flipped it on and turned up the volume. Bain' Goru's voice said, "Attention, all teams! Attention, please: Sanscomb is missing! Repeat, Sanscomb is missing! He wandered away from Mellows and disappeared. I am sending Mellows back to the scout to activate Sanscomb's search frequency. I want all hands to converge on the signal as soon as it starts coming in. All teams acknowledge."

Wu Hin quickly acknowledged and turned to McAlistair, his thin face taut with excitement . . . and a touch of fear. He said, "Sanscomb and Mellows were working the area right behind us. We may as well get started."

Wu Hin turned and began walking back the way they had come. McAlistair lingered a moment. The wind had changed, again bringing the odour of the swamp and with it a much stronger trace of the hauntingly familiar scent that had disturbed his sleep the night before. He sniffed deeply, trying to identify the elusive fragrance and almost gagged at the overriding smell of carrion. But then the unpleasant smell seemed to fade, while that of the flowers grew stronger.

McAlistair turned to follow his partner, aware that he had let an unsafe distance separate them and suddenly he was dizzy, sick, staggering as he tried to walk. He fell to his knees, fumbling blindly for his communicator while trying to call aloud for Wu Hin. His hands seemed unco-ordinated, unable to work the simple controls. Flashing lights, swirling streams of colour, a mixture of odd images from his earlier sensperieneces flowed into a jumbled and incomprehensible clutter before unfocused eyes. As if from far away he heard his own voice, but it was a weak whisper, calling for help that could not hear. He closed his eyes, trying to blot out the wild whirl of images beating against his sight, and for a moment it seemed to work. The lights dimmed, steadied, grew tangible. And suddenly, on an inner screen of eyelid, he saw a distant, dim figure . . . and then a sense of motion, the vague form moving towards him, growing larger, swelling into closeness and reality . . . intensely black hair fram-

ing a thin, elfin face . . . slim, fragile arms, small delicate girlish breasts, unexpectedly muscular legs . . . he was staring at Carolyn.

McAlistair riveted his gaze on the childishly thin but sensual form of his dead wife, feeling completely confused. This had to be a delusion, but the world around him had faded and only the pale white form and demurely alluring smile of the child-woman were real. She was wearing a single purple blossom in her hair, and riding in . . . it was a vehicle shaped like the corolla of a giant flower, with the sepals and petals facing him bent forward to the ground, forming a carpet of soft flower-flesh . . . now the plant-carriage was as real as the girl . . . he walked towards her, and she rose from her seat on the ovule case and took a light step forward, a hand outstretched in anticipation of touch, greeting . . . she was completely nude, and the promise implicit in her slight smile, reaching hand, grace of motion, was intensely erotic. He felt an almost automatic response deep within his spine, as though a switch had been thrown and current was flowing through long unused channels. In that first charged moment he felt not desire but the certainty of desire to follow. Carolyn had always affected him that way.

And then she spoke.

"*Alistair*." The word hung on the stinking air, lingering, a melodious sound. He stared at her, and thought of wild orchids, and somewhere deep in his mind a memory stirred . . . flowers of fragile beauty, growing in the fertile rottenness of decaying leaves . . . "*Alistair*," she said again.

She walked slowly towards him, out of the flower's centre and across the carpet of itself it had spread for her; the petals facing him lay quiescent on the ground, awaiting her return. Like a man entranced he walked to meet her, clasped the extended fingers in his own and found them warm and real. The last questioning doubts in his mind slid over an unseen edge into oblivion.

Carolyn turned back towards her odd vehicle, pulling him with her. He followed without resistance, numb, unthinking. The style and anthers of the great flower were gently shaking now, in a disturbingly hypnotic rhythm, and

he seemed to hear delicate, elfin slivers of crystalline sound, the caressing tinkle of fairy bells . . . and swiftly growing, a muted but powerful symphony, now held in check, waiting . . . the fragrance which lured and called despite the foulness it rode grew stronger and he was faintly aware of the wind on his face . . . the flower retreated before them. Carolyn paid it no heed, walking slowly forward, her face turned towards him, smiling . . . she slipped her arm through his and threaded their fingers, and they followed the slowly backing flower, uncaring . . . he was aware of the taste of honey beneath his tongue, a sense of lightness, ease . . . the very joints of his body seemed to be better oiled, easily turning, effortless . . . the music was swelling smoothly into power . . . he felt a soft, yielding surface beneath his feet, as though they walked on carpets of wool, spun hair, birdfeathers . . . and then he remembered that he always designed his sensperiences this way, starting with sight, bringing in sound, tactile, taste, pleasing kinaesthetics . . . smell had been there from the beginning, the only sense in this design that both drew and repelled . . . labyrinthine was only noticed when disturbed . . . if he had written this himself he would have been proud of it.

The thought jarred; he tried to cling to it, examine the implications . . . but there was no time. Only the noxious mist of the swamp formed a link with reality . . . and what was reality? She was on his arm, lightly clinging, and her name was Carolyn.

They walked steadily forward, the flower-vehicle as steadily retreating.

The world outside the narrow focus of McAlistair's attention receded and dimmed as the one containing Carolyn brightened. The question of real and unreal faded, itself unreal. He *felt* the clinging weight on his arm, *heard* the stirring music, *saw* the lovely woman . . . and smelled the rich, ripe scent of corrupted fruit blossoms.

They walked for an uncertain hour, a time without limit, without definition, over the softly yielding surface that cushioned their feet, while the weird carriage that had brought his love moved ever backward . . . and then it stopped, waiting.

McAlistair did not know why the flower had at last paused. He did not know why they pursued it. He was aware only that Carolyn was still on his arm, warm and alive, and that she was leading him on to the petals that lay waiting on the ground. They stepped inside the giant body and climbed on to the low ovule case. He saw that its top was hollowed out, forming a cup . . . the petals behind them rose, enclosing the lovers in an enchanted bower.

Carolyn turned and moved into his arms, lifting her face for a kiss . . . and he dimly realised, even as he bent towards her, that the sepals were pressing insistently against his back, urging him forward, and the backs of his hands had touched the walls on the opposite side. And then he knew pain.

Both hands were burning as though brushed with acid. The body in his arms seemed to cool, dissolve . . . he was clasping smoke. The pain increased, and he involuntarily turned his palms inward and pulled them towards him, pressing his protected elbows against the encroaching walls . . . suddenly his head was clear.

McAlistair felt as though he were standing on a high cliff, looking over its edge into a sea of varicoloured mist, where high-reaching billows sent angry spume curling about his feet. He knew, with grim certainty, that his head was actually clear and this was not merely a good illusion of clarity. He knew equally well that he had only a brief moment before the multihued mist would rise again to drown him. The pain he was feeling had jarred him out of the dream, awakened him enough for his trained mind to shake off the simulated sensory inputs.

The sensperience poet found himself standing inside the cup of some enormous flower-like plant, just as it had seemed to his senses, but the walls were of thick and resilient close-fitting purple fibres, not fragile petals. The space was so cramped the sepals were pressing against his back and extended elbows; slim Carolyn could have barely fitted within his arms. Two metres above his head there was a hole the size of his trunk, where the petals abruptly ended in a truncated cone. Blue Achernar was almost directly overhead and enough sunlight penetrated to show him the

interior of the giant plant. There was a slow steady oozing of green liquor from the tough purple flesh, a viscous fluid that crawled over his clothes and dripped steadily to the bottom of the cup in which he stood. He saw that the walls pressed against the ovule case tightly enough to form a leak-proof seal. And a pool of the green liquid was swiftly accumulating at the bottom of the cup; his feet were already covered.

As McAlistair looked down, one of the strings in his boots popped.

The acid-proof armour was protecting his feet, but the boots, worn to prevent bruises, were a form of man-made leather; the thick acid was slowly dissolving them. The clothes on his back were already in tatters. He became aware that the pain in his unprotected hands had grown more intense and wiped them on a dry spot on his chest. The fluid was hard to get off, but the burning eased. He realised that he had instinctively leaned forward, to take his exposed face away from possible contact with the walls. In a few minutes he would be engulfed in a pool of what was obviously the plant's digestive juice and once it reached his mouth he would die.

McAlistair reached for his communicator, touching a wall slightly in pulling the handmike free; there was a fresh rush of pain. And then he knew why the automatic search signal had not operated on Almeril's communicator. The unit was exterior to the form-fitting armour, and had been pressing tightly against a wall since he had entered the plant. The plastic mike was eaten through with holes, exposing the interior; the diaphragm was gone. The frequency crystals in the unit on his hip must have already dissolved.

The poet's vision abruptly blurred, a ghost of huge lips, Carolyn's lips, floating before his eyes . . . his precious moment of sanity had passed and he was being swept up again by the dream. He reached for his laser, twisting his hip to draw it away from the wall. The holster was almost gone and there was a spot of green on the weapon's metal tube, but the ruby tip was unharmed. He clamped his fingers hard on the butt, and knew that he must change this dream or it would be his last.

WARFARE! *Screams of the dying, shouts of triumph, hand-to-hand combat with bayonets and guns, bursting shells, incandescent streams of fire licking from flamethrowers . . .* he concentrated on staying alive, not trying to take the offensive, crouching in his hole and gunning down the enemy as they attacked . . . but they were coming faster and faster, and his finger worked busily, yanking the trigger again and again . . . something tugged vaguely at the back of his mind—when writing a historical remember that the old projectile weapons carried a limited number of charges—but he ignored it and kept firing. The attackers grew so thick he was swinging the gun in a steady side-to-side motion, killing them in great numbers, and still they came . . . he smelled the harsh stink of burned flesh, seared blood, a hint of carrion, decay . . . odd . . . but he kept firing, and suddenly the area in front of his hole was clear of enemies, and he decided to flee while there was time. He straightened up, stepping forward quickly, into the open . . . and something caught him from the rear, slamming violently into his back, hurling him forward . . . he collided with a dim wall looming before his startled eyes, fell back, and knew that he was fading into a darkening. . . .

McAlistair recovered to find himself in the middle of a violent coughing spasm, with Bain' Goru still holding the crushed stimulant ampoule beneath his nose. When his vision cleared he found himself staring at a huge purple plant a short distance away. It was made in the form of a tall cylinder, about one metre in diameter and almost five high. Several closely knit petals had been cut away, just above the ovule case, itself a metre off the ground. The ragged edges of the cut were still bleeding a sickly green fluid. The remaining heavy sepals and petals, now separated into long vertical slabs, were waving and jerking in apparent death throes, their tops whipping violently. And he understood what had caught him as he stepped out, hurling him forward to slam head-first into the trunk of a more solid tree.

With returning consciousness came the memory of great danger, and McAlistair tried to scramble to his feet. Bain'

Goru held him down. "Easy, man," the crew leader said soothingly. "You're still weak."

"But we've got to get out of here!" the poet gasped, and turned to face the breeze he felt on his face. The high dry land was two hundred metres away—they were on the second in a chain of hummocks connected by the mud ridges—but there was only open water between themselves and the solid ground. The prevailing wind was blowing again, and they would not receive odours from within the swamp unless it changed, but that could happen at any moment. "These plants—they attract you by sending out a hallucinogenic drug on the air! It has the same effect as a sensperience, giving you what you want. But it draws you to it, lures or tricks you inside, and . . . dissolves you for dinner!"

McAlistair was looking around as he spoke. On the opposite side of the small island he saw another of the strange man-eaters and on a lump of solid ground to the right, three more. Only the steady wind was keeping the four Earthmen from being infected.

Bain' Goru nodded. "We guessed all but how it brought you to it. That perfume we caught now and then beneath the stink, eh? But let's check that remaining monster before we go; we just might find Almeril inside."

McAlistair, still weak, lay back and watched as the crewchief and Wu Hin walked across the island, staying carefully upwind. The searing beams of their lasers quickly cut through the base of the second plant, and a skeleton tumbled out. It was still reasonably intact—evidently the bones were the last to melt—but it was not an Earthman.

Wu Hin briefly examined the slimy remains. "One of the birdmen," he said as he turned away. The biologist and crewchief hurried back to the others and helped McAlistair to his feet. The Earthmen needed no further proof of their danger. With Wu Hin supporting McAlistair on one side and Carson on the other, the four men hurried for dry land. Bain' Goru was on the communicator, warning the remaining team to return to the scout. McAlistair learned that Sanscomb was with them. They had found him, dazed and incoherent, wading in the edge of the swamp.

"Now we know there's a restraining influence on the birdman population other than destruction of eggs." Wu Hin said aloud as they walked. "If the wind is wrong when they hunt Crawlers or hide eggs, they don't make it back to land. The Crawlers are obviously immune to the drug."

It was a long hike to the camp, but the men did not pause until they were safely inside the scout with the port sealed. The team with Sanscomb had got there first. Two men donned spacesuits and went out again to gather up the outside gear. Within twenty minutes the scout lifted off and headed for the planet's equatorial mountains and their associated dangers, whatever they might be.

McAlistair learned from Wu Hin that they had got a fix on his location by activating the search signal before his transmitter burned out and arrived in time to see the man-eater toss him into the tree. "What I don't understand," Wu Hin added, "is how you managed to retain enough control to draw your laser and cut your way out."

There was a trace of resentment in the small man's voice, as though McAlistair should not have succeeded where two experienced spacemen like Almeril and Sanscomb had been helpless to aid themselves. "It was my training as a sensperience poet," McAlistair answered the implied question. "I had a moment of lucidity, just a few seconds, but enough for me to . . . change my script. I set my mind to dream a war story where I had to fight my way out of a tight place and when I went under again I kept firing the laser. I cut through the cylinder wall okay, but got hit when I tried to step out."

"You did very well," said Bain' Goru, joining them. "Sanscomb is almost back to normal. Too bad we had to lose Almeril, but now that we know the danger the colonists should be able to eliminate the plants. I hope this first landing hasn't soured you on planetary evaluation as a career."

"Yes, it has," McAlistair answered quietly. "I'm going back to sensperience poetry after completing my contract."

Bain' Goru gave him a sharp look, shrugged, and turned away. McAlistair did not bother to correct the impression of cowardice he had just given. He had learned something

about himself far more important than the crew leader's opinion. When confronted with the reality of imminent death he had discovered that its attraction was only a romantic illusion. Meeting Carolyn again, if only in a dream, had exorcised her ghost. She had been death-oriented from the start; at the deepest level of being he was a lover of life.

Now he could create again.

TWO RIVERS

by

R. W. MACKELWORTH

*Was it an ecological experiment or the end result
of dire necessity that had kept the community sealed
off for generations? Or something else entirely?*

TWO RIVERS

THE lake was delightfully trapped in a wide circle of green slopes. Except where the low buttress of a hill thrust into the water, the shoreline was a series of short curves as far as the eye could see. The encirclement seemed complete but the slopes opened up in the far distance, where the two rivers began their great journey. Jon didn't know their final destination but he wanted to know with all the keen urge to explore bottled up in the young. Like the lake he was trapped by the valleys and the hills around him.

When he looked up he could also see the reflection of sunlight on the clear membrane of the dome.

The dome completed the trap.

It was also a miracle. For five generations it had spanned the green valleys and protected them. No one confessed to knowing how it had been made or how it controlled the environment within, though they all thought they knew why it was necessary. They said it had been put there, long ago, because the air outside was tainted and without the membrane they would have died, slowly and painfully.

Yet, it let in the warm sunlight and somehow purified the water which fell softly on the valleys. Jon had worked out the simple cycle—water from the lake was drawn up by convection to the sun-warmed membrane, thence to fall as rain and return to the lake.

The lake was also fed by deep springs and in turn fed the rivers. But the lake was under the dome while the two rivers were free and flowed into places unknown.

From where he stood he could see the valleys, each with its own cluster of stone buildings and broad sweep of fields; each field heavy with crops or well stocked with animals, cattle, and sheep. It was different from the strange world outside, as though it had been taken out of space and time, carefully packaged, to succour and protect them.

Sometimes the dark gathering of clouds clung to the

outer surface of the dome and were shot with lightning. It was strange to watch the tumult and hear nothing of it. Even the birds, wheeling and diving inside the dome, were safe.

He shuddered with excitement. Tomorrow, he and the others were to face the outside together—the first to leave for a hundred years.

Somewhere, at the foot of the hill, he heard Simon whistle. It was shrill and demanding, calling him home. He sighed, took one last, hard look, and walked slowly down.

On his left he saw the low vastness of the factory and the ugly tower of the power house lifting high above him. The power house was a sheaf of concrete which reached the apex of the dome. Neither power house nor factory fitted into the general scene but they were real and their brutal simplicity was important. Without them the houses would be mere hovels, lacking both heat and light.

The big tractors too would cease to plough the fields and dozens of smaller machines would stop for ever. He had tried to imagine that, the crows flapping like black rags round the still tractors, deprived of their food as well.

He had once taken a broken machine to the factory. It had been stripped like an old carcass and rebuilt while he waited, automatically and without human hands.

It had made him feel helpless.

As he turned away he shivered again and forgot the experience. On the lake were the flat bottom boats, waiting to take him and the others, rocking gently on the slight tide.

He ran and the winding path flew by under his feet. He burst into the small clearing and was face to face with his brother.

"Where have you been?"

Jon saw that Simon's face was serious but there was also a hint of amusement in his eyes. Simon knew the answer to his own question, knew he had been saying good-bye. He was aware of most things, it seemed to Jon, almost as much as Bruno.

Jon smiled at him.

"I was looking at the lake."

The older brother studied the young face. It was a lively image of the personality within, part doubt and hurt memory and part unformed courage. The features were not yet set in manhood but their soft outline held promise. Since the terrible death of their parents the boy had been balanced on a fine tightrope.

"Bruno is waiting."

Jon nodded and followed him.

Bruno was waiting outside the door of his cottage. He was a tall, stooping figure, but he was impressive all the same, even when he jerked his thumb at the white square of the hospital and slouched away to it without waiting for them.

Simon frowned after him and Jon sensed what he was thinking. The journey was supposed to be an exploration but Bruno certainly had other goals. The so-called taint in the outside air was really an airborne virus. Bruno had told them that reluctantly but, in the same breath, he had said they wouldn't need to wear masks for the whole journey.

They had to trust the tall man. Bruno was jealous of his knowledge, as were all the others. Each had learned his speciality from his father and it was his contribution to the community. Bruno had learned medicine which had made him perhaps the most important, and powerful, of them all.

Jon was proud that he and Simon were farmers, but their skills were commonplace. They only understood about things which grew. All the same, they too would keep their secrets for their family.

There was a long tradition of secrecy which went clear back to the first generation, who were the most secretive of all. So much so that their history was a blank page—a deliberate withholding of what had gone before. It was possible the lost history contained much to be forgotten because it was bad, the seeds of destruction perhaps or merely the seeds of discontent.

In contrast the valleys held everything that was good. Someone had once decided they should remain there in safety but now Bruno had made a second choice for them.

Jon had often watched his lean face and had seen how it was possible. There was not only immense knowledge locked in the dark eyes but immense trouble too. Bruno knew. He knew because he was meant to know. His father had taught him and he had been a troubled man too—so Simon said.

All the same, Jon wondered how it was suddenly possible to go outside. Then he realised it was just because Bruno had said so. It was his decision really.

He wondered if he would learn, out there, what had torn his parents to pieces when they had ventured to the place where the opening in the dome spanned the two rivers.

Meekly he followed Simon into the white building to have the last of his injections. He glimpsed Carl walking towards the hospital with his wife Heidi and he pondered why they were bothering at all. They knew that Bruno had no injections for them. In a flash of insight he was sorry for them and thought they ought to be lonely on their boat without company.

The membrane encompassed the lake like a great skirt, except where the two wide arches spanned the rivers. The rivers themselves were flat legs split by the single black rock forming part of the central support of the arches. They had but a brief glimpse of the swiftly moving streams and the rainbow hanging eternally over them, before they were swept through.

One boat went either side of the rock and it was like the parting of two friends. On Bruno's boat they all clung to the rail, fixed at waist height round the cabin wall, as the boat breasted the surge. The passage was rough but they felt the mental wrench of parting worse, as though it were a physical blow that matched the crash of fierce waters.

Jon soon found it easier to watch Simon swinging the wheel, the bow of the boat scuffing a white crest as it turned against the tide.

They rose and ran with the river. On their right the black rock sank into a long, low bank of hills but the other boat was still to remain hidden, it seemed, for ever.

Jon looked back. The temptation had been too great for him and he had to look. He was surprised at the tears in his eyes which blurred his vision.

The dome was a huge silver blister that reached across the river, from left to right, and high above. Within, he was sure he could see their home—a green and brown bubble caught in a crystal bowl, an impression or a reflection, a place which lingered in his mind for a moment and was gone.

He closed his eyes and turned away.

The boat was in the middle of the stream now, its propulsion so muted it was lost in the slap and rush of the water passing along the hull. Simon touched the throttle and the jets lifted the boat higher, thrusting it forward.

Through the forward window there was a dim vista of misty hills, but the spray from the bow wiped it out as it flew back on to the glass. One by one the three passengers sat back and allowed their eyes to drift upwards to the sky. Only Simon concentrated on the river.

Jon glanced at Beth but she seemed absorbed with what she saw. Suddenly he wanted to talk to her but somehow he was afraid to interrupt her thoughts.

Beth was impressed by the high vault of the sky and its towering black clouds. It was the first time she had seen it clearly and its sheer size overwhelmed her. She was tempted to recall what they had left behind but she closed her mind against it resolutely, trying to forget she had only come because of Simon.

At last she sensed Jon's look. As always an insistent finger of pity stirred her compassion for him and evoked a cold little feeling of fear which was harder to understand. The boy's face was white but his eyes glowed as if he were quietly burning inside.

She realised that Bruno was watching him as well. He studied him as though he were a thing rather than a person, as if he were staring at an insect in a gas jar.

Beth remembered the virus. Bruno would be looking for that. The virus had attacked people even in the dome but, there, it had been mild. Outside it might be different; any immunity they had might not be sufficient, the immunity

built up over the generations. She wondered if Simon had realised the risk he had taken by bringing the boy. Perhaps Bruno had realised. After all, Jon had had more injections than any of them. It suddenly struck her as strange that they had all had different doses.

Her mind turned to Carl and Heidi. How much she envied them—a childless, middle-aged couple but secure in their love. They had given the valleys the most complete story of devotion of its generation. They had gone alone—alone on their own river in their smaller boat.

She started. They had been given no injection at all. Suddenly she thought she saw what Bruno was trying to prove. In her eyes he changed subtly, even as she looked at him. For the first time she thought he was less than human.

The river widened but Simon kept the boat in the centre. On either side, the hills were falling away into a wide flood-plain, but the water was shallow. Though the boat could skim over the shallows there was always the risk of a sudden rock projecting above the surface and not seen until the last moment.

Jon threw up his arm.

“Look!”

At the edge of the flood a dark shape was undulating in a swirl of mud and water. Its coils were half loops which rose and fell and twisted.

“And there!”

His voice trembled with excitement.

The others shared his excitement except for Bruno who stared and mumbled and made notes, his thin face brooding on new facts.

Close to the boat, a round shape was fanning its way across the stream, its two windmill arms as wide as paddles. Its small, compact body was dun-coloured and its brown eyes seemed to look at the boat with quiet intelligence. Jon heard Beth laugh with relief and pleasure. He warmed to her fresh beauty as well as the creature outside.

They watched until the whirling fan was far away. Then they saw it dart sideways, in a frantic spray as the large eel moved in on it. For a second they were separate shapes but soon merged into one furious flurry.

Finally, the long undulating shape of the eel slid on alone. The delicate windmill had vanished and its compact, dun body with it.

The river was empty again and Jon shared the emptiness. All of them sat silently and Bruno alone looked satisfied, as though he had backed one of the creatures to win and had chosen the right one.

“The eel is one of our species.”

Bruno’s voice was cold. He looked round at each of them, his eyes asking a question which none of them understood. It was as if he were asking them to guess at what he knew for sure. None of them tried to answer because there was the hint of an insult in his look.

The river suddenly narrowed and the distant horizons closed in. For several hours the boat went swiftly with the stream.

When the next change came there was no need for Jon to exclaim or point. They could all see the tight foliage and undergrowth fighting for space at the water’s edge. The wall of vegetation wasn’t merely green; it was mostly red and crimson, like the blood of a living animal.

The branches of the higher growths were threshing to and fro. Unlike the trees in the valleys they had limbs rather than branches, dancing out their own nightmare on the fringe of sanity. Here and there, a dash of gold or blue darted above them, just out of reach. In the middle were violent convulsions, movements that were independent of the bright mass.

The movements might have been something caught, or some animal making its own arrogant passage through a familiar tangle.

Bruno was no longer satisfied.

Even Jon could sense the man’s uneasiness, his near anger at the thriving disorder on the bank. The anger exploded a second later.

The same kind of eel they had seen earlier was floundering close to the bank, apparently pulled inexorably towards the greedy mass. Long limbs streaked into the water, as if they were bright birds diving for fish. They looped themselves round the coils of the eel, until it was one strand

among the many, drawing it into the maw of the red trees : trees that were a travesty.

Bruno threw aside his notes.

None of them had heard him swear before. A huge burden of tension seemed to break the grim calm of his thin face until there was an intense loathing in his eyes and little else.

Simon calmed him. "I think it's an island. The river must be joined by a tributary further along."

The man seemed to relax at once. He nodded eagerly.

The long limbs reached out for the boat and Simon opened the throttle. It was obvious he now shared Bruno's horror, without realising that his horror was immediate while the thin man's was rooted deep in his secret knowledge.

The boat bucked to one side and they were clear.

As they swept round a long bend their spirits lifted. Beyond the island was another shore and, on it, a small knot of a hill. The hill was bare and green on its neat flanks but topped by a group of tall pines. The pines drew Bruno's attention and he smiled his satisfied little smile again—as if he had never been angry.

"Shall we stop there?" Simon asked.

"We can't spare the time."

Jon started and saw the same surprise in his brother's face. There had never been talk of urgency. Suddenly he sensed their destination was more important than the exploration after all and he thought he ought to know why. He should sense that too.

For the first time he had a feeling that the answer to the question was all about him, if only he could see it.

The river twisted to the left. It was squeezed between rising cliffs and rushing forward into new turbulence. Simon's hands tightened on the wheel and his foot touched the throttle firmly.

His mouth was dry when he saw what awaited them.

The surface was dippled with black rocks, it boiled and eddied round small whirlpools. The walls of the cliffs were jet black and smeared rusty red in places. High above, dark

rocks perched on the edge of the cliff tops, rocks poised to fall into the cauldron below.

He screamed a warning.

He had no way of knowing whether they had heard him or not and no time to find out. The boat was thrown from side to side and for once he could hear the engine note changing as the boat fought to retain its equilibrium. He had a feeling the craft had not been designed to take such punishment.

It was probably only minutes before they were through but it felt like hours. The sudden widening of the passage was a surprise which almost took him unawares.

The river swept into a brilliant world of green and amber, capturing their eyes and their minds.

Hills surrounded them. One round top rose above another like bubbles blown up from the ground. They were shaded from green to gold and the trees, at the water line, were as fragile as ferns.

The boat swung, creeping into the shore with the curious timidity of an animal seeing fertile land for the first time. Then the bow touched the bank gently.

Bruno growled, "Why are we stopping?"

Jon watched silently as Simon tore his attention from the soft hillsides to stare at his questioner.

The thin man's face was drawn and pale, the hard eyes demanding an explanation.

For a while they stared at each other, a battle of wills. Then Bruno seemed to realise it was what he wanted after all. "We can spare an hour or so." He returned to his notes, as though the whole matter was easily settled.

Almost innocently, he asked, "Why not go ashore for a while?" Because he didn't look up when he spoke the innocence seemed less sincere.

Jon felt a spasm of jealousy as Beth moved close to Simon. Her tone was a caress, a secret pledge of her understanding and support. "It's beautiful. I wish we could go."

Simon smiled at her. Jon could see that he was half persuaded. He frowned at Beth because she had only said what she thought Simon wanted to hear. His eyes flickered nervously to the slopes outside. They were sweet with short

grass, and tempting, but the trees were new to him and he was afraid. It was safe in the sealed cabin—once the airlock was opened they were at the mercy of the world outside.

"You won't need the masks."

The boy glared at Bruno but almost sighed with relief when Simon shook his head slowly. "We'll take them all the same."

He watched as his brother took two of the white masks, deep and round like tambourines but which moulded to the face—covering both eyes and mouth completely.

Jon started up. "Please take me too, Simon." His voice was full of appeal and he was ashamed of himself because it made him sound like a small child, begging for a favour.

"Next time."

He turned to the window and stared out. His body was trembling with disappointment as he remembered, bitterly, what now seemed the empty triumph of their departure. Fifty families from the valley had watched them go, most of them glad to remain in their safe haven. But Jon knew that others, as young as he, were sick with envy. It had helped to fill the special void inside him, the void which was deeper than the lake but once filled by his parents. Now he was to be left behind by Simon.

He felt Beth put her arm around his shoulders but he stiffened and rejected her. It was no comfort for him.

Simon slid back the door and they were gone.

"We shall take a short trip up river while they're away," Bruno said softly. He stood up and touched the wheel.

"No!"

Jon sprang at him and caught his arm.

The man looked down. Surprisingly, his face was full of compassion and a strange pain. His hands slid from the wheel. "Don't you know," he said, "I would have to come back for them. All of us must get there or it's no good."

Jon sat down. He didn't understand but he knew he had won for the time being.

The hill rose like a plump bosom with the now familiar knot of tall pines at the top. At the foot the other trees seemed frivolous by comparison. Simon and Beth could see

the water lapping on the fine shingle of the beach and it all seemed normal. Even through their masks the air was fresh. It was an effort of will to remember that the virus was unseen and undetected until it was too late.

"Shall we go to the top?" Beth asked.

Slowly they climbed together. It was warm and they could feel the perspiration on their bodies. Above all it was quiet. That made them wary.

Simon felt they were walking in a new world. Though it was so like the country under the dome, he sensed it had been alien once—not so long ago either. It was like an animal which had been half tamed. Even the grass was an intrusion, a kind of rape of what had been there before.

He knelt down.

His farmer's mind was no longer content with appearances. He had to know for sure but the feel of things around him was wrong and he knew it.

Beneath the grass the soil was covered by a thin mould, as green as the grass itself, living its own secret life as if it had been there before the grass had come.

He said: "There's nothing like this under the dome." He scraped at the soil and showed her the green mould. "The trees are different too. At least those by the river." He spoke with fresh urgency, realising, for the first time, just how different they were. He pointed at the pines. "They are real trees. The others only approximate to trees."

"Bruno knows about this."

Beth had said what he had begun to think, in private. But, if Bruno knew, why had they not been told too? The first generation had a reason for keeping their mouths shut but if they told some why not all?

He straightened and looked down at the boat, suddenly fearful. It was floating at the edge of the stream, a bright toy in the bright sunlight.

Beth whispered to him in an awed tone. "There's something wrong with the trees."

He shook his head. "It must be the wind." But there was no wind and he could see they were now bunched together ... close to the boat.

A dark shadow moved across its stern. The shadow was

curiously hard and sharp, threatening because it was well defined.

His eyes snapped to the trees again. He tried to find the object that was casting the shadow but he couldn't find it. The wispy branches were trailing in the water like long hair, they no longer seemed a delicate fringe but a close packed rank, bending over the boat.

Simon began to run down.

There was a definite movement in the trees now, a stubby brown trunk, raised up on its roots, appeared to topple forward. Its roots were thick and brutal and one of them was swinging over the boat as if it were a bludgeon.

It rose and fell. A rending crash was followed by another and then another. The root was pounding at the cabin, falling upon it with the force of a hammer.

Simon remembered how his parents had died.

Jon hardly believed what he could clearly see through the window. In the moments that followed he acted from instinct and all he could think of was his brother, running down to the boat.

He pushed by Bruno and scrambled through the hatch.

He dodged the falling root and leapt for the bank in one quick movement, turning his head to see the attacker. It was less a tree trunk than a coarse-skinned sack with thick, odd angled arms.

The trees whispered at him and he felt their green fingers touch his body.

Simon had almost reached the shore when Jon stumbled into his arms. In the same moment Bruno's face appeared at the cabin window, a pale shadow without expression. The face vanished and the craft began to swing into mid-stream.

Jon allowed his brother to pull him up the hill. He heard a frenzy of wild blows and was sure they were falling on the fragile trees, in revenge or punishment.

Soon Beth was with them and they watched from the shelter of the pines, in a tight, lonely group, as the boat dwindled to a speck on the river.

"He's deserted us," Simon said grimly.

Jon might have told him it wasn't so but he couldn't. His mind was on the stunted shape in the soft halo of ferns. "That thing . . ." His hand fluttered desperately. "That thing killed my parents." His voice was shrill. He choked on the words, his anger growing from confusion into conviction as he spoke.

Beth was white faced. "We must get him away from here."

Simon turned to the boy and gently squeezed his arm. "We can never be sure of that, Jon. It's over and done with." Then he nodded to Beth. "We will give Bruno an hour, no longer. Soon it will be dark and we must find somewhere safe." He managed to sound calm. "If necessary we can go overland to the other river."

The girl grasped at the straw. "Carl and Heidi! We can wait for them and they will take us on their boat."

Simon wasn't so confident but he was glad to see her happy. He knew, logically, they should still put their trust in Bruno and wait, however long it took, but he couldn't. Bruno had left them for a purpose, whether he returned or not. He had put them at risk.

They couldn't wait long. The green fringe was moving slowly up the hill like a strange and slightly ridiculous army.

Carl was a big man and he had often felt clumsy and ill at ease. He had always thought it strange that Heidi should have chosen him since she was small and delicate, her fair head not even reaching his shoulders. He cast a glance at the cabin and wondered if he could leave the open cockpit to speak to her. She had been ill all day, from the time they had left the first stretch of river where the dark cliffs were ramparts of rock and lava.

He had wanted to return to the dome but the boat lacked power and could make no headway against the current. That dawned on him slowly, after a number of attempts. He had a feeling Bruno had known there was no return and had kept his mouth shut.

Carl hated secrets.

He knew they were living in a world that didn't belong

to them and he had longed to tell what his father had told him. Yet, he couldn't because it was wrong. For that reason he couldn't blame Bruno either.

His own father had told him how the first generation had come from somewhere or nowhere to build the dome. Before they took refuge within it they had first undertaken a huge task. They had introduced their own environment to the outside as well as to the dome. This was done by planting here and there, even sowing the grass which had always been their best ally. In time the new vegetation would take over completely and make the whole planet their place, to wander in at will.

There was little doubt he had the secret only because he was his father's son and was trained in botany.

This secret he shared with Bruno.

He wondered what secret Bruno shared with Simon and Beth. Painfully he puzzled over his suspicions. His thoughts settled on vague rumours he had heard, rumours about a virus.

Heidi had told him about someone who had died through the virus. They said he had turned yellow and his body had stiffened long before the end. The man had lain on his bed like a yellow statue, a figure encased in gold but still able to move his eyes. The eyes, they said, had appealed for help which no one could give.

The sweat stood out on his brow.

Carefully he brought the boat into the bank and dropped the small anchor.

The black rock which made the shore was smooth and glistening. In the cup of the valley the clouds rolled down on them with a darkness of their own. He shuddered. It seemed, after all, that the new plant life had failed to take because there had been no sign of life along the river. So far his trip had been wasted.

He smouldered with slow anger. Bruno had gone in the boat with the sealed cabin but he and Heidi were unprotected. He tried to work out why.

Finally he gave it up and went into the little galley behind the cabin.

Heidi was bent over the tiny sink.

She was holding herself up by sheer effort of will and her neck was running with sweat. Also there was a faint yellow flush beneath her skin.

He grasped the truth in that second.

Jon could hardly believe they had only walked for an hour or so. He was weary beyond belief. The trees stood about them in tall, rigid lines as if they had been formed up as mere striplings and hadn't dared to creep out of line since. That, he realised, was stupid imagining because these were real trees. They were formal and severe and, in their maturity, they were solid and comforting, the light hard on their flanks as the sun sank. The forest floor was bare in places, especially where the dome of the hill thrust up. Elsewhere there was deep beds of leaf mould.

Earlier, Simon had climbed one of these giants but gave up the effort, once he had confirmed that neither river was in sight. He had a feeling they were at the half-way point.

Since Jon had told them what Bruno had said to him, Beth and Simon agreed the thin man would have returned but they were sure too he had indeed left them for a reason. He wanted to find out if the virus would attack them when they were exposed to the outside air for a while. It was as simple as that.

The silence in the forest was another dimension, as deep and calm as still water, in which one could immerse oneself and be lost in a great peace. Simon was even tempted to end their journey there, forgetting both Bruno and the other river.

Yet, he knew they couldn't stay. The urge to go on was nagging at him because he was sure there had always been an ultimate destination for their journey. "We will go on for a little longer and find a place to sleep. In the morning we will find the other river and wait there for Carl and Heidi."

It was almost dark before they stopped.

They found an unexpected jumble of smaller trees and a rough patch of bushes surrounding a small open space. There, they settled down to sleep.

Jon was restless. At last he rolled on to his side and asked

the question which was bothering him. "Does this world really belong to us, Simon?"

His brother stirred and said nothing for a moment. He too had asked himself the same question and found there was more than one answer. "I don't think so, Jon . . . not yet. But it will belong to us one day. Whoever planted this forest made sure of that."

For Jon it was suddenly clear. They had taken a barren world, or part barren and part possessed by an alien life, and they had begun to refashion it. Which left him with another question—where had the first generation come from and what was to happen now?

The dawn light crept into the cabin and Carl could see his wife's face at last. The night had been long. He had sat through it patiently, despite both his mental agony and the torture of a violent headache.

Her eyes were open. They were bright blue in the golden stillness of her face and they were smiling at him. He had made up his mind how he should act but he wanted her approval. The smile was sufficient.

Reluctantly he left her and went to the cockpit. He slipped the clutch and put the engine into gear. The boat strained against the anchor and he cursed grimly—he didn't usually make that kind of mistake.

The effort of bringing the anchor inboard surprised him but, eventually, he did so and got the boat under way.

He wanted to find land, any land which was green and fertile. He prayed he would find it down river. As if in answer to his prayer the boat took them out of the black valley and into another. The lava ended there. Instead he found a wide green plain with copses of young oak, here and there, as if planted in a park. He swung the boat in-shore and grounded it on the beach.

Despite his pain he laughed to himself.

Bruno had wanted to know if the virus was still active. He expected the boat to drift downstream with their bodies, mute evidence to the power of the virus, or to see them alive and well. Now he would never know for sure.

Quietly he returned to the cabin and brought Heidi up to the deck. He lifted her gently on to the bank and she lay there, her eyes wide open, staring at him.

He felt a brief panic for what he was doing but the blue eyes still seemed to approve, so he tied the boat to the nearest rock and lifted her again. As he did so he saw that the backs of his hands were yellow.

For the first time, since they left the dome, he was completely calm. In the dome they had been somehow isolated from the others, lonely amidst plenty, having no children of their own—nothing but their love. Here, they were all there was.

Stiffly he carried her away from the river towards the first of the trees.

Jon was awakened in the morning by a sly rustling. It was working its way around the bushes, where it seemed to become entangled for a while before working itself free with gentle persistence. Simon was already on his hands and knees, facing the sounds. Beth was lying near by, staring at him and asking the same silent question.

In the long moment of waiting, Jon recalled how their dog had crouched by the door of the house the night their parents had died. Its hackles had risen and it had finally sprung at the door, but its master and mistress had died a mile across the valley and its gesture was wasted. Simon was crouching for the spring now.

Suddenly he lurched forward and tore through the cover of the bushes. The rough twigs tore at his face but he hardly noticed them.

Jon heard him cry out.

Beth scrambled through first but she was only inches in front of Jon.

The tall trees thinned out dramatically and beyond was the downward curve of a valley. A mile further on a river glinted in a flat plain.

Jon saw all that in a glance but he soon concentrated on a movement close to hand. It looked like a large bundle of loose hay, more or less round, rolling over the short turf and down the slope. There was something both comical and

haphazard about its progress—as if it were being blown along helplessly in a strong wind. As it rolled away it shed pieces behind it, leaving an untidy litter in its wake.

He looked at Beth mischievously, wondering if she had an irresistible urge to run after it and clear up the litter. He saw she was shaking with laughter and was already taking a step forward.

Simon took her arm.

“Leave it alone, Beth.”

They stood very still and the ball came up the slope again, abreast of them. For a split second it wavered then tumbled away to their right in an urgent panic.

They had all seen the small round creature in the middle of the ball of twigs and dead grass. Its legs were tiny but they were frantically working round inside the loosely woven construction, to which other debris had attached itself. By immense effort it was not only propelling itself and the bundle but holding the rubbish together. A white glisten of some sticky substance gave a clue to the miracle.

It looked innocent as well as unique.

Jon recalled the other small animal in the river. His face saddened. Bruno had been so pleased when it was killed. He was sad too because he was sure the victim, and this creature, belonged to the old order of life in this world. The eel had been as new to it as they.

All the same he was still laughing when they reached the plain. He laughed as they ran into the small cluster of trees.

Simon stood among the dappled shadows, where they mingled with the light, gazing about him with evident pleasure. Here it was fertile. Everywhere there were deep cushions of leaf mould and they could smell the warmth and sense the thrusting life.

He swung round the tree with joyful exhilaration.

He swung round and froze.

In a tiny clearing something shone like gold in the sunlight.

Standing like a great statue was the figure of a man. Only the clothes hanging from his body were proof of his humanity. His face was as bright as beaten metal and his eyes were rigidly looking ahead.

In his arms was a slighter body which was held as though it were a feather. But it was as hard and rigid as he, the face a mask of gold and the eyes as amethysts, blue and bright. Simon dropped back behind the tree.

Jon tried to push past him but Simon held him tight.

“There is nothing we can do,” he whispered softly.

The boy turned away, hardly hearing Beth’s frightened sigh. “What do we do now?” he asked quietly.

“Find their boat and go on.”

Simon’s words were cold and empty.

It was an uneventful trip. The boat was small but it didn’t matter to them, nothing mattered now. They hardly noticed the widening river or the change in its colour. They could not ignore the tang of salt in the breeze which blew on to their bows.

The rise and fall of the boat, as she faced the incoming waves, warned them of fresh experience to come. Each of them began to search their minds for an explanation but it was outside their experience. They could only believe they were nearing another lake.

They didn’t have to find out. An opening appeared in the shoreline and Simon edged the boat towards it.

There were two squared off embankments and a channel of water which ran between them as straight as a ruler. The channel stretched into the distance to a point of perspective which tempted them. Hours later the point was still there.

As they ploughed the one narrow furrow of water, Jon was awed by the simplicity of the engineering. Like the factory in the dome it was the product of a great complexity which made it look easy.

He pointed out the obvious.

“This channel links the two rivers.”

Simon nodded slowly.

In the late afternoon they saw the opening and the river beyond. The tide fought them for an hour but the boat butted into the choppy water slowly and soon the river was spread before them like a silver sheet. Beyond there were the rising buttocks of high hills and a wall of cliffs. Far to the right an expanse of water merged into the estuary. It

was shaded green into blue, with delicate frills of white drifting towards the shore and the river.

The other boat was aground at the entrance to the channel. Its back was broken and it looked as ugly as the rocks about it.

Simon allowed their boat to drift closer and lowered the anchor. He jumped on to the bow, waited until they swung nearer the rocks and leapt. He scrambled to the wreck.

At first he thought it was empty but he wrenched open the door to the cabin and found Bruno.

He was lying on his side and his face was stained with yellow. When he opened his eyes they were full of pain.

"How long?" Simon asked.

Bruno shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Are the rest of you all right?" The thin lips were cracked and dry.

Simon shook his head. "Carl and Heidi caught the virus and they are dead. We found them close to the river."

Bruno closed his eyes. "We have no natural immunity then—even now, after all this time." His tired eyelids dragged open. "I injected you, Beth and Jon, but the rest of us..."

All Simon's dislike of the man vanished in an instant. He didn't ask him why he had left them behind; it didn't matter any longer. Bruno had taken the big risk and knew he was taking it.

The ugly face screwed up with new effort. "They must be told. Take the other boat across the river. On the top of the cliffs you will find a building." He fumbled in his shirt and jerked a key from his neck. "This will open the door. Follow the instructions you find there and tell them about the virus."

Simon didn't understand but he could see Bruno was very near death. Whether he was merely rambling or there was another mystery didn't really matter.

"I'm sorry, Simon."

There was nothing to be said. Bruno was beyond both recrimination and regret.

The building stood alone. It was a square box with no windows and only a plain door. It gave nothing away but it

was there, just as Bruno had said it would be. Simon had to use the key to find out why it was there.

The key turned easily in the lock.

He went in alone.

Inside it was brightly lit and as plain as the exterior, except for a long desk which ran the whole length of one wall. There was a seat fitted neatly in the knee hole and, above it, an array of switches and a screen.

On the desk was a small object he didn't recognise. It was like a frozen, metal flower—a small mesh bulb on a slender stalk.

A red light began to pulse.

A panel was suddenly illuminated and three words appeared.

ON THE AIR.

He read them but they made no sense to him. Neither did the printed instructions under the glass on top of the desk. All the same, he did as he was bid and picked up the metal flower, knowing now that it was called a microphone.

The screen sprang to life above him.

A face was resolved from the glow in the screen.

He tensed in anticipation.

The man's eyes stared at him directly, as if they were in the same room. Though Simon was sure the other was a long way away the feeling persisted. He felt as though he were under a microscope.

"Are you Bruno?"

Simon shook his head.

The voice was devoid of any natural tone. It seemed to come through a long tunnel which robbed it of all humanity, of every small inflection. But he had to answer it.

"Bruno is dead."

There was caution in the man's face.

"Have you anything to tell me?"

Simon told him what Bruno had wanted him to tell. He told him about the journey and the virus, especially the virus.

The face was composed now. The hollow echo in the voice betrayed nothing of the man's feelings. "If Bruno had

come I would have told him that the virus didn't matter." Perhaps, because he realised what he had said, his face took on a new look of compassion. "But some of your people died and you do not understand what it is all about."

"No."

The stranger nodded slowly.

"Watch the screen."

In a moment a bright sparkle of colour drifted across the screen and a pearl grey sphere appeared in the centre, gradually filling the whole of the brilliant square.

"This is the Biosphere. If it were dark outside you would see it as a pinprick in the western sky. It is ten miles in diameter."

The voice was formal, almost cold.

"In that pinprick there are a hundred thousand human beings who have travelled for many years to reach this planet."

The words exploded in Simon's brain. "Who are they? Where do they come from?" He shouted his questions. The few facts he had been given tumbled through his mind like vagrant fires, burning themselves into his consciousness. With sudden insight he half understood.

"They are people like yourself and they come from Earth. A hundred years ago your people made the same journey."

Simon grasped at that. It didn't matter what Earth was or who the people were. What did matter, to him, was his own identity and to whom or what he belonged. He asked it as plainly as that.

The voice answered, "You are part of a planetary exploration group who were put on this planet to test and alter the environment."

Simon was confused. "Not I. I was born here and I know nothing." He hesitated. "No one knew anything but Bruno."

The face reappeared. It bore the same deep lines of worry which Simon remembered on Bruno's face. The face was the face of knowledge. "The first generation knew. Some were told a little in every generation since. One in each generation had to know everything."

"And you say it wasn't the virus?" Simon was still not

convinced. In spite of what the man had said he couldn't believe they would land so many people until they were sure. Only that made sense of the five lost generations.

"No."

The voice was adamant.

"We are only concerned with the happiness of a hundred thousand people. Disease is the natural risk of living which we accept. It is the joy of living that concerns us. That was why you and your people were cut off from all memories of your origins. In that way the first great shock of displacement was over in one generation and you could start afresh. For similar reasons those in the Biosphere were isolated from the mainstream of life on Earth before they left."

Simon recognised the ring of truth. He was ready to listen now and believe.

"If they land here they will have you to depend on. They will accept the leadership and attitudes of the people in the dome."

Simon had one question.

"And what of Earth?"

The face had character. It was lean and hungry for a mystery known to it alone. It was as old as memory and worn by fatigue.

That was answer enough. Simon guessed he could never expect more from a system of communication he knew nothing about. He was glad they hadn't been given it.

Instead the stranger had his question.

It was the question.

"Can we land them?"

Quietly, Simon told the man all he knew of the dome, of his childhood and of the people. He told him particularly of Jon.

"The decision is yours."

He ended decisively and felt no conscience.

Jon was waiting outside the building for Simon to come out. He had endured a deep surge of loneliness which had come unbidden and had swamped him. Beth was standing close to the door and she was waiting for Simon too.

Despite her warmth Jon felt cut off from her as well as from Simon. They belonged to each other. That would, one day, exclude him and because it was right it seemed doubly unfair.

He was distracted from his thoughts by a bright flash high in the sky. As he watched he saw a round ball skimming between a gap in the white clouds, like a pebble bouncing on the waves.

A silver fleck parted from it.

It was an opaque capsule in which he could just discern a shape and a movement as it descended. The capsule was oval like an egg but it opened as gently as a seed split by the warm sun, a few moments after it landed.

His breath was caught in his throat as he drew nearer. An intuition turned over his misery and left him empty for a little while, receptive to new experience.

From the two halves of the capsule a small child stumbled into the light of day. It turned, in its confusion, to him and he took it into his arms. Fiercely, he clasped the child to him.

The Biosphere appeared again and a host of silver flecks filled the sky.

THE HERO

by

ERNEST HILL

One generation's acclaim can be an anathema to the next or perhaps totally forgotten in the new order of things. Take a blind space hero, for instance . . .

THE HERO

THE blind spaceman stood on his usual corner and the sun touched his face. It was 1500 hours. He knew it was 1500 hours. The shadow from the tall building of unknown function had passed across him and was now stretching the length of 253rd Street. Every day he walked down the cool of the shadow, tapping with his long white stick and counting the paces. Yesterday it had lengthened one pace more. 925—the vernal equinox. Today, it was Spring. 1500 hours on March 22nd 2094. Or was it 2095? He stooped with difficulty, arthritic in the left hip and a stiff knee joint, swollen after a casual setting. Doc Kilroy Cousins, losing his nerve in a Jupiter space-probe, spinning 6 degrees off course and plummeting towards mascon 90.

Down at last on his haunches, straight-backed as a Cossack, searching. His begging bowl. Where was his begging bowl? He fanned out with both hands, squatting, skimming the concrete with his finger tips, feeling for the join. The smooth sealant between the sections. There—spilling, unevenly set over and between the chipped, worn edges. He followed the line, moving one painful hopped step at a time until his fingers touched the round metal dish. Empty, as usual. There would be rain soon and water again. Perhaps dew in the morning if the sky was clear.

He clutched the dish with both hands, pressed down, levered his thin frame upwards, jerked, groaned, and came again to a rigid, bent vertical. Transferred the bowl to his left hand. Drew back his shoulders, gasping with the slow crepitation of dry cartilage until the scapulae touched. He raised his chin firmly. Erect. Bend and the sightless vacuum closes in. Brittle, you snap. Chin, challenge the void and the amorphous legions recede. Stared out. Chilled by the dead human eye. 2094 or 2095? He backed with hands spread out behind him to the wall. Felt for the soft stone and the marks of his blunt space-knife. Counting the marks. Forty-

two. Forty-two years since the crash of *Daedalus II*, the fire and the senseless vacuity of his blindness. 2094. Wishing, as usual, one year ahead. One year less to live. One year less to his sole entitlement. The climax. Coffined, boxed, and sealed. Fired to his last flight. Jettisoned in orbit around the sun.

"Spaceman 2609581116, Aston Wainwright. We commend his body to the depths of space, incorruptible. inviolate as long as the universe shall last. And may God have mercy on his soul. Amen."

It was a fine thing to be jettisoned into space. An honour. One last honour to the list of commendations, medals, ribbons, epaulettes, stars, and planets culminating in the Three Concentric Suns. Hero of the Western World, 1st Class. The greatest honour of them all. He touched the gold circles stitched to his torn jacket pocket. They were still there and meant very little now. He would have traded even the Three Concentric Suns for the Last Flight. The Hero's right. His pride and privilege.

"Say! Whassa funny jerk standing there for, eh?"

Children. There had been fewer children lately. Fewer people of any sort. World population had been falling fast even in the days of *Daedalus II*. Birth control. Rays too, they had said. Leaking in. Disturbance in the stratosphere due to orbiting ironmongery. Too many fast craft in and out. A good thing. Too many people in the world. Always had been. Men would be better able to manage their world when there were less of them to want it all to themselves.

"Why's he got his eyes shut, Andy?"

"Say, Mister! You asleep or summin'?"

Better not to answer. Better to stay very still. Soon they would lose interest and go away. Children bore quickly. Do nothing to make them think him mad. Or blind. Nothing to let them know he was slow and stiff and helpless. Children are very dangerous to the helpless. Understandable. The mortal spark. Germ of the man that is to be.

"He's blind!"

"You blind, Mister?"

Wait now. Wait for the stones. The sudden blows. The laughter. The challenge to Blind man's buff. Never move.

Never try to strike or dodge or guess where the next lump of rock will land. Add to their fun and they will keep it up for hours. Understand them. The hatred of the strange, the maimed, the different. Contempt of the helpless.

"Chuck a brick at him, Bodger!"

"See that! Smack on the ear 'ole!"

Blood running. A sharp edge somewhere. A pity. They will like the blood. Symbol of life and personal liquidity. Not much left in the veins now and none to spare. More stones. Stand very still, Wainwright! Don't move. Don't flinch. They'll give up if they can't make you cry out. Boys will be boys. They can't help their genes. The age-old, mellow, maturing genes of man, shackled in his rusty chain of chromosomes.

"Say, Mister! I'm 'ere! Right in front of you! You can clout me if you try!"

Must not strike out. He's there, I can hear his breathing, fist drawn back and ready to punch. Must not move. Must not bring the white stick down about his shoulders. Much too slow. Must not anyway counter violence with violence. Add one more kink in the long, bent chain. One more distorted gene. Wait! Mother! But that boy is strong. Gaspd a little there, stomach sagging, muscles weakening with age. Straighten again, wait for the next. The stick! They've taken the stick. Nothing to lean on, nothing left to probe the outlines of the lightless shapes and map the molecules in density and less than dense. Probing. Prodding. The neck, the face, the eyes. Blood sticky on the cheeks. Old man's blood. Oozing, thin and blue-red from the drying arteries, slow-pulsed, clotting, filling the deep grooved crescent curves in sunken leather-textured cheeks. A pause. Over very soon. Bored now. Breaking the stick and kicking the begging bowl away. No loss. No loss at all. Empty for many days, leaving only the long flight training, the discipline, to eke out life to the last dry calorie burning low in a stomach withering in its drought of arid glands.

"What's that thing on his jacket, Andy?"

"What's that thing on your pocket, Mister?"

"You dumb as well as blind, Mister? What's that yellin' thing you got there?"

"It is the Three Concentric Suns."

Better tell them. They will know I can speak now, but I must tell them about the Suns. Everyone respects the Three Suns of Space, the Hero of the Western World.

"What's the three suns then, mister?"

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing very much at all."

There were suns now, turning before his sightless eyes. Subjective, many-coloured suns and a silver-milk pathway threading in serpentine bead-strings through a black universe, mottled in patchwork planes of shuffled splendour. Row upon row of windowed galactical light jogging in slow procession the rounds of a celestial squared circle in paternoster sequence to an engined heart-beat at its core. His core. His heart. The sun of his last orbit rising over the dead hills of yesterday's inconsequential moon. His sun. His urn. His casket. Orbiting. The eternal paternoster.

"What's this, then?"

A cop. There had been fewer cops lately, in the latter years of the shortening and lengthening shadows, the hard core equinox shading into a penumbra of a summer still to come. It was forbidden to beg. It was forbidden to starve too, but the state was tolerant. Reasonable starvation in private. To consenting adults in dark cellars, tidily near the incinerators and handy for the garbage squads. Not on the streets. On the streets starvation embarrasses, offends, dries up the gastric juices, an affront to civic pride.

"What you annoying these boys for then?"

"Yeah! That's right! Annoyed us, 'e did."

"Stinking old scarecrow!"

"Went for us 'e did!"

"Exposed himself!"

"Dirty old bastard!"

"Larrup 'im wiv yer night stick, copper!"

"I'm sorry," he said.

"No use being sorry!"

There was a heavy rap on his forearm with the night stick and his right hand hung numb and useless. Broken? Only bruised, so far, the fingers moved slightly. Very slightly. If the cop noticed, it would be both arms and his head as well. It is the way of cops, the way of all men with

power. Genes again. Those who can understand must do so. A tough job needing tough men. All the world would beg if the cops were easy with them.

"You asking for trouble? Sparring up are you?"

"No," he said. "I'm not sparring up."

"And you'd better not try and be funny. Feel that?"

Another blow, skilfully on the same bruised elbow.

"Yes," he said. "I felt it."

"See them things on 'is pocket? Three suns, 'e says they are. Not real gold are they?"

"By Hokey Cokey!"

The cop's head was down somewhere by his chest breathing stale beer and garlic, feeling his pocket with a large hand. The night stick, dangling from a thong, jabbed an area of pain around his solar plexus. The breath exploded in a hiccough of mixed canteen odours and a chewed cigar butt expectorated in a spittle of tar and chewed loose strands.

"Where'd you get these then, cockie? Where'd you pinch 'em?"

"They are mine," he said. "You will find my name and number tattooed on my right arm."

The right arm! He gave his first low cry as the cop took it, stretched it and rolled up the sleeve. It seemed it was broken after all.

"Spaceman Aston Wainwright. H.W.W."

"It is I."

"What's H.W.W., then, Mac?"

"Hero of the Western World."

Laughter. Deep and throaty from the cop, shrill, raucous, and uncertain from the boys. Echoing the cop and not sure what they were laughing at. They should have known. Clever, normal boys. Funny? Yes, it was funny. The world had always been a funny place for heroes to grow old in. As inevitable as death itself. You laughed, or smiled, or were just too bored to notice. It was better to laugh. There is little in life so worthy of immoderate cachinnation as out-of-context heroes on the brink of death. A joke at any time, heroism reaches its most absurd in unheroic ages. Heroes die in battles that historians calculate should never have been fought at all. Disappear in space surveying planets

that were rock and useless, climb mountains for no better reason than to plant a flag on top, questing abstractions, predicating the tangibles in terms of doing rather than ownership of the done.

Heroes are gathered in their tumuli of bones at every starting post while the late, glad, wise, and foolish also-rans trot past the final tape and spend their evenings in the clubhouse swopping wives and ditties in the sane, safe, con-course of the second-hand. Heroes—but why the whistle? Ultra-sonic, but audible to the trained ears cupped sentinel to the dead eyes; three blasts, tooting the police channel for assistance. More cops to come. The three gold suns ripped and the wind cold on the bare heart behind the hold. A second cop answering, coming in fast on the whine of a hover-bike, broadsiding the air-lanes and sliding to a deflated halt on the dry, crumbling concrete of the gutter. The umbra of the second tower. Touching the cheek. 1600 hours.

"What you make of this, Slogger?"

"What—that? What is it then?"

"The three bloody suns, you lummo! And they're genuine as buckshot. Tattoo marks on his arm an' all. Should fetch a bit from any of them down-town museums. They never gave more than five of them ever."

"What's the three suns, that's so special?"

"The old space-flight days, you great ignorant blubber-guts. This chap must be all of a hundred and twenty years old. Gave 'em hormones or something to keep 'em alive on long trips. Never found a thing worth a nickel and gave it all up forty years ago. And here he is, standing on a corner and saying nothing with a fortune on his pocket what nobody noticed nor knew what it was."

"We're splitting on it, are we?"

"Course we're splitting on it. Need a witness, don't I, that he gave it to me of his own free-will? What you think I called you for?"

"You there! You give 'im this, didn't you?"

"Yes, I gave it to him."

"What about 'im though? Going to leave 'im there just like that?"

"He's on his last legs, by the look of him. He won't miss it. You there! You're blind, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm blind."

"There you are then. Let him die in his own way. Can't see who we are. No need for us to clobber him."

"You going to live long, grandad?"

"No," he said. "I am dying now. When I stop caring and let myself go, I shall just sit down and die."

"Funny old geezer."

"You will see that the authorities are informed?"

"What authorities, grandad? We ain't got anything you might rightly call authorities down here."

"The space-centre. You will inform the space-centre?"

He waited a long time, holding on to life and probing the vacuum and silence around him. The pledge. The written promise of the president. The last right he had waited forty years to claim. Holding on to life, disciplined, repelling the welcome of the dark wings until their proper scheduled time. It was finished now, somewhere out there the sweep of the wings rustled, closing about him. Someone spat two chuckles and a throaty cough. The dark face above the wings smiled an enigmatic smile. Hoarse laughter. The honour of the Western World in the balance of a long shadow passing. 1605 hours. Three! Two! One! Burn!

"We'll sure let the space-centre know, grandad!"

"Thank you," he said, and died.

THE TRUE WORTH OF RUTH VILLIERS

by

MICHAEL G. CONEY

In the long run, the basic fault with any Welfare State—despite its good intentions—is its bureaucratic inhumanity. People eventually become cyphers on a computer card.

THE TRUE WORTH OF RUTH VILLIERS

THERE were only a few sightseers at this hour, just a dejected handful of gazing ghouls gathered around the fenced-off rectangle of rough scree. A light, drizzling rain sieved through the twilight, fine but penetrating, sufficient to dampen the enthusiasm of the most avid tourist. A camera clicked from time to time, etching on silver bromide the abandoned pit, sunk like a quarry into the hillside and featureless apart from the wooden hut built on top of the shaft. I stood as they stood, elbows resting upon the new fence although, unlike them, I alone had the right to cross the enclosure and enter the hut, if I so wished.

I did not do this. I stayed outside, as though a sightseer. To violate the privacy of the enclosure, to climb down into the pit and enter the shed would have identified me. The watchers would have regarded me, questioning, as I descended, and one of them would have recognised my face from the newspaper photographs of the last few months.

Then they would blame me, condemn me as the man who had left Ruth Villiers to die. They would watch me climbing back up, and I would see it in their faces. Murderer, their expressions would say.

Yet Ruth Villiers still lived, about fifteen feet beneath that wooden shed . . .

Some six months ago I was sitting in my office, a reasonably contented man with nothing untoward on my mind. If I remember rightly, my attention that day was engaged by a minor problem concerning the upgrading of a local plumber. Such problems form the basis of my job. They can be solved by using a minimum of commonsense allied to a few years experience. Six months ago I considered my work undemanding, but six months ago I had not met Ruth

Villiers. Now, I have still not met the girl face to face, and I wish to God I could. . . .

The plumber sat opposite me, cap twisting in his hands involuntarily, as though he were divining water, clad spot-tily in his working clothes.

"My income for the past year, Mr.—er—" he glanced at the nameplate on my desk "—Archer, was one thousand three hundred and seventy Creds. My present Social Value Cred Rating is two thousand three hundred Creds." He looked aggrieved. They always do. It is part of the stock in trade of my customers, this hangdog look as though they alone are condemned to poverty in a world of affluence.

"You consider that you should be upgraded?" I asked. I knew what he considered, of course, but I enjoyed watching people sweat it out, six months ago.

"Yes," he replied with timid aggression, like a cornered sheep.

I slid his file towards me and opened it, making play of adjusting my bifocals. He was right about his income, at any rate. It was there in black and white. Cr. 1,370, as returned to the Inland Revenue.

Taking my ball-point, I computed the familiar sum :

Earnings entitlement—equals $1\frac{1}{2}$ times gross	
annual income Equals $1\frac{1}{2}$ times 1,370 ...	Cr. 1,955
Plus Basic Individual Entitlement (Commonly	
known as "Birthright")	Cr. 600
	—
Total	Cr. 2,555
	—

Obviously the nervous little plumber had a case. He was due to be elevated two steps, to a Social Value Cred Rating of Cr. 2,500. He must have worked his guts out last year, poor devil, and now he wanted to reap some sort of reward, status-wise.

"I'll look into it," I promised. "We'll let you know. Next!" I pressed a button on the desk ostentatiously, cutting short any possible argument. He walked out backwards

as though I were royalty. Instead of the next customer, my clerk Eccles entered, breathless.

"Emergency, Mr. Archer!" he panted. We had emergencies every day, actually, but he never got used to them. He still twittered with panic at the first sign of a claim computation, which was why he was still my clerk, instead of managing a District of his own.

"Send him in," I said calmly, expecting to see some bereaved pensioner who wanted an advance to bury his wife. I frequently get sorrowful relatives touting for hand-outs, but sorrow is relative—to quote a private joke between Eccles and me—and each case is treated strictly on merit. Tears of sorrow will not blind a person to the possibility of a benefit and we generally find that the wetter the cheeks, the more outrageously the Department will be soaked.

"Er . . . it's not a death case, Mr. Archer." Eccles corrected me. "It's a real emergency. An accident claim. There's no next of kin, either. Just this lad, says his name's Jack Griffiths. Boy-friend of claimant."

"Oh." I thought for a moment. "Well, you'd better send him in, just the same." It was filthy luck getting an accident claim today, when Forbes was expected at any hour.

Forbes, I must explain, is our Regional Director. His job, which I imagine he enjoys, is to travel about the various Districts within his Region, raising Cain. His favourite pastime is going through the case-files with a magnifying glass, trying to establish that I have wasted public funds through being over-sympathetic.

Perhaps I ought to amplify at this point, as not everyone is familiar with the workings of the Department of Social Value. It goes like this.

Suppose someone is in hospital, awaiting an expensive operation. The obvious question poses itself: is the patient worth treating, bearing in mind his value to the community? So the hospital sends me a claim based on the estimated cost.

Then I call the National Bank and find that the patient has accumulated savings totalling (say) Cr. 2,000 to date.

And I consult my own punch-card index and find that he has a Social Value Cred Rating of (say) Cr. 1,500.

That person, therefore, is worth Cr. 3,500 to the community. Nothing more; nothing less.

So if the operation costs up to Cr. 3,500, the scalpels will flash and he will be healed, presumably.

But if the operation (including pre- and post-operational care and treatment) is estimated at Cr. 3,501, his flesh will remain uncarved. He can, however, receive lesser treatment and drugs to the value of Cr. 3,500, at which point he will be discharged from the hospital. What he does then is up to him; but assuming he is able to start work again he must repay the loan of Cr. 1,500 on his Social Value Cred Rating before he can start to accumulate any personal savings again. In repaying this amount he will be allowed the bare minimum of his wages for living expenses. In fact, he will probably be fed and lodged by his friends, provided they are not caught doing it. Undue Sympathy is a punishable offence, and rightly so, because why should one man secure an unearned advantage over his fellows?

Years ago in the mid-twentieth there was a National Health Service whereby all doctors' and hospital bills were paid by the state. There were other Social Services too, in the nature of Unemployment Benefits, Retirement Pensions, etcetera. In other words, people were actively encouraged to spend time in hospital or otherwise out of work, and discouraged from saving for their retirement.

This unfortunate system remained on the backs of the British for over fifty years, until the population crisis of the early 2000s and the emergence of the Darwinist party of which I am the local Branch Secretary. Opponents of our party might say that we stand for the survival of the fittest, but we prefer to think of the Darwinist system as fair shares for each, according to his ability.

It is a beautifully simple system, ideal in our country, where all property belongs to the state, unlike other less progressive nations I could name. Our only personal possessions are the SVC rating and accumulated savings in the National Bank. Savings revert to the state on Death.

All the same, you can see what I mean about the tempta-

tion which might face a weak Valuation Officer on occasions to be over-sympathetic.

Anyway, in came Jack Griffiths, boy-friend of claimant, looking sick.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Griffiths?" I asked formally.

"It's not me . . ." he stammered. "It's my girl-friend, Ruth. Ruth Villiers. There's been an accident. . . ."

"Oh, Well, strictly speaking, I am only empowered to deal with claimants personally, otherwise we could all spend each others' money, couldn't we? So I'm afraid you'll have to take me to her. You must realise that these things have to be done properly."

"Oh, my God." He looked stricken, poor little sod. I pictured Ruth Villiers in some remote hospital with both legs broken, unable to receive anything but the most basic attention until the formalities had been gone through. It's on occasions like this when I wonder whether the system couldn't be streamlined a little, giving everyone an emergency allowance of (say) Cr. 200.

"Well, where is she?" I asked again.

He bit his lip, hesitating. "You can't see her," he said at last. "There's been a fall at the old Wheal Pentire mine. . . . I think she's OK but I can't get to her. She would have been up at the face; there's a big chamber there with walls of granite. I can't see that collapsing. . . . But the whole of the entrance is caved in, and she's inside. How can you see her, under that lot?"

That was the beginning of the Ruth Villiers affair and like most intricate problems in my business it appeared simple at first hearing. All that was required of me was a trip to the Wheal Pentire mine—an abandoned working near Camborne-Redruth—a quick, expert assessment of the situation, then a yes or no as to the feasibility of digging the trapped girl out. Obviously I would exercise my discretion in treating the boy-friend as next of kin.

Two hours later I stood at the mine entrance with Jack Griffiths, both of us in heavy overcoats with collars turned up against the biting wind which, over the years, had sculpted the stunted trees into streamlined teardrop forms.

I often wondered why those old miners chose such desolate situations for their pits, and whenever I see those broken chimneys which punctuate the bleak countryside I can imagine the craggy Cornishmen scratching the grudging Earth for tin with masochistic enjoyment.

Wheal Pentire was small as such mines go. The entrance was indicated by the rotting remains of a shed and a rusty narrow-gauge track which ran up to the abrupt hillside and terminated at a heap of tumbled boulders.

"We were larking about," Griffiths explained tensely, staring fascinated at the rock-face. "We've often been in there before; right up as far as the old face half-way through the hill. Anyway, Ruth ran in there and I went in after her. I heard her laughing, way ahead of me, just before I ran into the prop..."

He went on to describe it; how the pit-prop, rotten with years, had shifted and begun to crumble. A few stones pattering from the roof had become a roaring collapse in a matter of seconds and he had just made it outside. His voice was bitter, and I sensed a degree of self-condemnation. He felt that there was something he should have done, something more than just saving his own skin and going for help. It was useless telling him that his actions had been the only ones possible in the circumstances; he was intent on blaming himself.

Anyway, there was the fall, and somewhere in the middle of the hill was Ruth Villiers, possibly unhurt and approximately two hundred yards from the mine entrance. The cave-in looked extensive; I could see a depression in the rising shale of the barren hillside, running for some distance and marking the course of the collapse until it merged with the general rise of the broken ground.

Griffiths was regarding me wide-eyed, awaiting the opinion which could mean the life or death of his girlfriend. "Can you do anything?" he asked at last.

I had already consulted the Social Value Register and found that Ruth had a rating of Cr. 1,200. She was only seventeen and worked as a Grade VI in the South-Western Agricultural Centre, so her income was just Cr. 400 per

annum. This gave her an Earnings Entitlement of (1½) Cr. 600, plus Basic Individual Entitlement of Cr. 600.

Cr. 1,200. It could be done, just.

"I'll have to get a surveyor in," I told Griffiths. "But it seems to me that if we brought in a GEX 2/6R excavator and took out a pit about there"—I pointed to a spot about fifty yards beyond the apparent limit of the cave-in—"we could break into the tunnel from the side, without bringing down any more of the roof... Assuming she's safe, is there plenty of air?"

"I think so. The tunnel opens out into quite a big chamber near the face."

"She'll have to go hungry for a while. We won't be able to sink a preliminary shaft, not on Cr. 1,200. Has she got any savings?"

"Oh, yes," he said eagerly. "We were saving up to get married. She's got a balance of about Cr. 300 at the National Bank."

"Good. That's Cr. 1,500 altogether. I think we should be able to manage on that," I said, feeling like God. "We'll go back, now, and I'll work out the figures."

"How soon before we get her out?" he asked anxiously, staring at the hillside.

"About three days, I should think," I replied confidently. "She'll be hungry, but that's the least of our worries."

Symptomatic of our times? Yes. The thought of a terrified girl trapped underground for three days worried me not one bit. After all, I didn't know her; to me she was just a number on the Register. So the number was temporarily missing underground? Never mind; there was every chance of it reappearing again, thus balancing the books. Griffiths looked at me strangely, but then he was not a Valuation Officer. I deal with cases like this all the time.

Back at the office, I settled down with the manual of plant rates. I find this type of work very interesting; it's one of the few instances when there is scope for initiative in my job.

Anyway, the initial figures were soon out and I had an unpleasant surprise. They were way over the top:

RUTH VILLIERS—ESTIMATED COST SHEET

Surveyor's fees.	75
Hire of GEX 2/6R at Cr. 13 per hour. 72 hours (say)	936
Wages of operators—3 shifts including night bonus and travelling time.	200
Transport of GEX 2/6R to and from site	260
Accommodation and food of operators	10
Floodlights and electricity for night working.	20
Incidentals	50
	1,551

Griffith's face was dull with shock when I showed him the cost sheet. "I thought you said it could be done," he muttered, accusing. "I thought you said Cr. 1,500 would be enough." He ran down the sheet with a slender finger which shook a little. "Incidentals Cr. 50?" he queried. "What's that, for Christ's sake? Your rake-off?"

I fought to contain a rising tide of annoyance. "My services are provided free by the State," I informed him shortly. "Incidentals cover a number of things and Cr. 50 may be a conservative estimate. Basically, you need that sort of money to pay the men extra above the standard rate, so they'll get on with the job. There are other expenses, of course; but that's the main item. Gratuities."

"What!" Griffiths was white-faced. "Are you saying that you have to tip the buggers to work hard, when there's a girl's life at stake?"

"Well, yes ... Look here, Griffiths," I said kindly, "you've got to see it their way. They don't know your girl from Eve. To them, she's just another job, and when that job's done, well, they might be on idle pay. So they tend to spin it out a bit. It's cheaper to give them an unofficial bonus and charge it to incidentals than it would be to have to hire the excavator for another day."

"Christ." Griffiths was shivering; he sat opposite me across the desk, looking lost. This sort of thing was new to

him; he had no experience of the careful negotiations inherent in labour relations.

He was looking so wretched, in fact, that I began to feel genuinely sorry for him. "There's still a chance," I said gently, "if you're prepared to take it."

"What's that?"

"We do without the surveyor. We just hire the men and the excavator, and start to dig. I've got a plan here"—I pulled out a yellowed sheet of paper—"of the old workings. I think we can take a chance on it and dig here." I had already marked the possible starting place. "In fact, we've got to take this chance. It's the only one you've got. This way, the maximum cost should be about Cr. 1,476. Provided we don't strike any snags, we should be OK."

"Cutting it fine, even then," Griffiths was nibbling his fingernails.

"I realise that." I folded up the plan. "Can I take it you agree? There's a lot to get organised."

"OK." He got to his feet.

"See you at the site tomorrow," I said.

He showed me a photograph of her, of the two of them together, taken while they were on holiday three months previously. Ruth Villiers was an insignificant-looking girl; mousey hair, pale complexion, weak features. It was a full-length shot and my chief impression was that she looked the sort of girl who might have trouble in childbirth. You see this type of woman a lot, these days; despite Darwinism and encouragement for the fittest. It's as though Nature, jealous of the success of humanity in other directions, is trying to foul things up biologically.

I didn't say anything, though. Griffiths looked at the photograph for a long time before replacing it in his battered wallet. We both stood silent for a while, stamping our feet and waiting for the excavator to arrive.

It was a misty morning of late autumn and the scene looked particularly desolate; the crumbling, barren shale hillside, the stunted trees almost bereft of leaves, the rusty, overgrown rails disappearing under the menacing mountain

of rubble. The sky merged into the damp hills and the air was harsh and moist.

The place had a weird atmosphere; you could imagine, vividly, the old miners coughing their tubercular way to the face, grimy hands gripping sodden packets of cornish pasties. It's said that they used to make the pasties of pilchards, wrapping the fish in a bone-hard casing of pastry of such durability that the food could be dropped down a fifty-foot shaft without shattering. Nowadays they make pasties for the tourists, of minced algaemeat clad in starchate, and I daresay the taste is no worse.

A rumbling from the valley announced the arrival of the excavator; soon we could see it, a huge yellow-tracked vehicle winding its laborious way along the misty lane, on the back of a low-loader, swaying top-heavy. The truck pulled up and the driver descended from the cab to join us, flicking his cigarette to the ground in a damp sizzle.

"Where do you want it?" he asked tersely.

I pointed up the hillside and he pursed his lips. "Tricky, that," he said. "They overbalance easily, do these excavators. I'm not sure Jeff can take her up there. No. I don't like the look of that at all."

A van pulled up and a succession of men climbed out, stretching their limbs.

"Jeff!" Our companion called across.

"'Ullo." A large, pot-bellied man in blue overalls lumbered towards us.

"Gent says you've got to take it up there."

"Oh?" Jeff scratched his head. "Well, I don't like the looks of that. Tricky stuff, shale. Start sliding on that lot and she'll be over before you can say knife. Don't stand a chance, if that happens. If she rolls, the cab crushes like a matchbox."

Resignedly I reached in my pocket and drew out Ruth Villiers' National Bank card and punch. Jeff produced his own card with alacrity. I punched Cr. 2 on his receipts side and he punched a similar amount on Ruth's payments side.

The first incidental had been incurred.

Griffiths was watching; as soon as the men had shambled back to the excavator he spoke.

"What's to stop me paying Cr. 500 into her account, to be on the safe side?" He asked, like so many before him. They must take us for fools.

Once again I explained. "As soon as the Claim is notified, the account is frozen. The only item which can be credited to a frozen account is arrears of wages genuinely earned to a maximum of one week. Just that one item, nothing more. Otherwise the system would be meaningless, don't you see? Any relative could pay money into the claimant's account and say it was the repayment of an old loan, or something."

"I suppose so," said Griffiths heavily.

"I could tell you some stories," I went on, warming to my pet subject. "It's amazing the way some people try to get round the law. I had a case once——"

"Look," interrupted Griffiths suddenly. His fists were clenched white. "I'm not interested in any of your bloody stories! What's more, I'm sick of the way you seem to treat this whole business as an academic exercise. Don't you realise there's a girl under there? A human being, like you and me? She's trapped under there, and all you can think of is the interesting technical ramifications! For God's sake, haven't you any pity?" He was obviously overwrought.

"Take it easy," I laid a hand on his shoulder. "I realise it's your girl down there, and I'm sorry. I had a claimant die in hospital yesterday, and I'm sorry about that too. Since the Social Valuation Act came in, over nine thousand people have died who, before 2012, might have been saved. I'm sorry about them. But it's for the general good. Starving Chinese are dying like flies and I'm sorry for them. But perhaps that's for the general good, too. Now, how sorry can you get? You've got to learn to accept these things."

"I suppose so," muttered Griffiths after a pause. He didn't agree with me, really. He just didn't want to antagonise the one person who might be able to help.

A black saloon drew up behind the workmens' van and a neatly-dressed man got out. He picked his way through the loose shale towards us.

"Press," he announced concisely, producing a card. "I understand there's a young girl trapped under there."

"That's right," Griffiths said eagerly. I could see what he

was thinking. This man might, through his paper, wield some influence. Perhaps he could drum up public sympathy, causing such an outcry that some sort of official grant would be forthcoming. Griffiths went on to describe the situation but I could have told him he was wasting his time. Once you made one grant, everybody would be queueing up, and the system would collapse.

"Thanks," said the man from the *National Daily* eventually, folding his notebook and slipping it smoothly into his pocket. "Now. Do you mind if I take a photograph?" He was a very polite reporter. He took a photograph of Griffiths looking sick, the background a pile of rubble.

"Good," he said. "Now what about the young girl, Ruth? You don't happen to have a snapshot of her I could use, I suppose?"

"Certainly." Griffiths produced his photo, handing it over.

The newspaperman examined it closely, tilting it at different angles, covering parts of it with his hand, whistling tunelessly under his breath. "Yes," he said at last, handing it back. "Yes. I'll let you know if I need it. Actually, I'm not sure if I shall be able to use this story at all. It lacks . . . er . . . interest. No meat in it. Quite possibly a wasted journey, I'm afraid . . . Ah, well." He shuffled his feet, extended his hand to each of us in turn. "I'd better be getting back." He left.

"What was all that about?" asked Griffiths, vaguely annoyed by the man's abrupt departure.

"You heard what he said. He's not interested. I don't think it matters. A newspaper story would have made things worse, bringing sightseers along, getting in the way."

His reply was drowned by a sudden roar from the excavator. It moved forward, tilted, and ran off the low-loader to the stony ground. Turning, tracks screaming, it churned away up the shale slope, Jeff gazing down at us from the high cab.

Work had commenced.

I departed at about five o'clock that afternoon, leaving Griffiths standing in the drizzling rain watching the men rig

the arc-lights. I went straight home. I didn't feel up to calling at the office; in short, I was dead beat. There was something about the situation—the callousness of the workmen at the site, the motives of the reporter, the general attitude of everyone including myself which had stirred me up during the day, twisting my guts until I was hating them all, me most of all. I couldn't forget that plain little teenager buried under the hillside.

It was bad, this sensation which could only be described as sympathy, and I tried to expunge it from my mind. It could lose me my job, turn me into one of the faceless thousands I see every morning riding the conveyor to the South-western Industrial Centre. I could become like Griffiths, a machine operator on Cr. 800 p.a. Doris wouldn't like that; she was very conscious of social rating. I remember an occasion when we had to ride the conveyor during the rush hour, due to minor trouble with the car. I can see Doris's face now, that frozen look as she stood swaying to the motion, surrounded by the workers in their overalls. She was withdrawn, mentally huddled within herself as though by so doing she could minimise the effect of physical contact with the masses. I may appear to be standing with them, she seemed to be saying, but spiritually I am elsewhere, way above them.

And quite true, when her husband, me, brings home Cr. 4,000 per annum. Her spirit can afford to live it up. All men are created equal, they say, and they prove it by the Basic Individual Entitlement of Cr. 600. But then, as time passes, Nature takes its course and the pushers get to the top. Like me. Whereas Griffiths and his ugly little girl-friend stay behind, unable to rise from the viscous masses. And why not? Because they are no longer equal. They have proved themselves inferior. This is Darwinism.

It's a good system. The only fair system.

So that night I went out and got drunk and when I got back I was sick, and Doris became unpleasant about it. I told her to go to hell; loudly, so that the neighbours would hear. The people in the next apartment have a Social Credit Rating of a mere Cr. 1,500; God knows how they can afford the place.

All next day I sat in my office wondering how things were going at the site. No sign of Forbes, and just as well. I could do without the tension occasioned by a full-scale examination of the books.

The day after, about one o'clock, I could stand it no longer. I told Eccles I was going out; and went, before he could start twittering about all the appointments he had arranged for that afternoon. I took the car to the site.

As I climbed out of the car—it was not raining, thank heavens—I could see the lone figure of Griffiths standing disconsolate on the hillside, a huge chunk of which had been bitten out by the tyrannosaurus jaws of the excavator. He was gazing into the pit, the bottom of which I could not see from my present position. The scene was curiously silent, the excavator motionless. It appeared that operations had temporarily halted and I imagined the workmen had deemed it time to claim further incidental expenses. I made my way up the slope.

"What's going on?" I asked Griffiths.

His expression was blank; he looked at me blindly, unfocused, then his gaze returned to the pit.

The men were leaning against the grounded jaws of the excavator, smoking. They looked up as I scrambled down towards them.

"You've got troubles," one of them said flatly, the cigarette at his lip twitching in time to the words.

"Oh, for Christ's sake . . ." I looked around seeking some explanation of their inactivity, and failing. They were waiting for me to ask them. "What's the difficulty?" I asked.

Not replying, the man Jeff took up a crowbar and tapped the ground graphically, with a ringing sound. I bent down and brushed the loose shale aside with my palm.

They had struck a stratum of solid granite.

Avoiding the stricken look from Griffiths as I climbed back out of the pit, I made my way down the hillside to the car.

Seating myself, I tried to think constructively, but all I could accomplish was self-condemnation. This was my fault. True, I couldn't have known that the granite was there; but it was I who had dispensed with the advice of a

surveyor on the grounds of expense. I had made a mistake, one which had probably cost Ruth Villiers her life—always assuming she was alive at present. And she quite possibly was alive, perfectly safe in that granite chamber which Griffiths had originally told me about and which I, in my anxiety to cut costs, had forgotten.

I sat there for a while. I could see the others, Griffiths now joined by the workmen, standing on the edge of the pit and gazing down the hill at me, waiting for a decision as to the next step . . .

OK. So I would make the decision. The frustrations of the past few days had built up to a knot of fire in my stomach; I suddenly found that I was shaking, I flung open the car door.

There was a field telephone at the pit connected by a temporary cable to the excavation gang's headquarters in the village. I would use that to order, on my own authority, a mechanical rock-breaker and team. I would stall the Credit Requisition when it passed through my office and, by the time the delay was discovered, Ruth Villiers would be free.

Then I would face the music and the loss of my job, and the abrupt fall in my Social Credit Rating as they forced me to repay the credit I had, in effect, stolen. For everything must be in balance, that is the System . . .

Well, sod the System.

I was half-walking, half-running back up the hill when a shout from behind caused me to stop and look back. Another car had drawn up, the driver was waving to me urgently. The passenger door opened.

Forbes stepped out.

He climbed towards me briskly, bowlerhatted, bespectacled, thin face lined with many years of seeking out discrepancies.

"I hear you've been having some difficulty up here," he said, looking at me keenly and sizing up in practiced fashion my distraught appearance. He had seen this sort of thing before. "You weren't thinking of doing anything foolish, were you? No . . . No . . ." He smiled thinly. "Of course you weren't. You're a careful man, Archer. A man after my own heart. Now. What seems to be the trouble?"

"As I see it, the position is this."

Forbes was talking in that verbose civil-servant way he has—I wonder if I talk like that?—and we were all grouped round listening while he indicated his computations with a delicately-held ballpoint.

"Miss Villiers, provided she is still alive, has Cr. 400 left to her name, which is obviously insufficient for financing an endeavour to break through this granite. Hire of mobile breaker for one day, with crew, Cr. 500." He tapped the figures again. "And it is not permitted to hire such expensive equipment for a period of less than a day, even if you could get through in that time."

"So?" I asked, deferential. How much did Forbes really suspect? Could he possibly know that I came near to exhibiting Undue Sympathy?

"There is one course open to us now, and one only." He spoke gravely, looking at Griffiths.

"Yes?" Griffiths was eager for some hope, any hope.

"We must utilise the remaining Cr. 400 in the best possible way, which is firstly to sink a shaft through to the chamber for air and food. This, I estimate, will cost all of Cr. 200 even with the high-speed mobile drill I propose using.

"Which leaves Cr. 200. For food."

He stopped talking and no one else started. We were all, I think, working it out. Ruth Villiers was unable to earn money while she was down there. So when the Cr. 200 was finished, so was she.

Griffiths spoke at last, huskily. "But Cr. 200 ... that's food for about ... seven or eight months. So what you mean is, she just stays down there, buried alive until her food runs out! For God's sake, you can't mean that! Where's your humanity?" He clutched Forbes' sleeve.

Forbes stood still for a while and I felt that this was, for once, a job which he was not enjoying.

Then he disengaged himself from Griffith's grasp. "Well," he replied calmly, "that's the System. It's not Humanity's fault that your girl got herself trapped down there, is it?" He paused, and I like to think that his next words were meant in all sincerity.

"If I were you, I would pray that she strikes gold."

He walked away, and soon his car was moving off down the lane to the village.

"Christ..." Griffiths was gazing after the receding vehicle. "So that's the sort of man that runs things. Mr. Archer," his voice shook, "isn't there anything we can do? Isn't there any hope at all?" His eyes kept drifting away, up the hill where the excavator stood motionless. "Can't you tell the men to carry on?"

"There's no point," I replied quietly. "They'll never get through with that machine, not if they tried for a month."

"It's not right!" he burst out. "Not for the sake of a few lousy Credits. What good is that to anyone? You could spare the money, so could I, if we were allowed to. The System is all wrong!"

"The System's OK," I said. "It's just that, now and then, we get situations arise where our judgment is clouded by personal involvement. Look at those men up there." I gestured towards the workmen packing their tools and preparing the excavator for departure. "They don't care, because they don't know your girl-friend."

"But surely it's not *right* that they don't care?"

"Let's forget that. Look at it this way. The economists have worked out exactly how much this country is worth, and have estimated its future worth with reasonable accuracy. Now the country consists of people, and it's only right that the people should have a fair share in all this wealth. Right?"

"I suppose so."

"And when I say a fair share, I mean just that. Every person gets no more, no less than his entitlement. Now supposing you had five people dying in hospital because each of them needed twenty Credits more for an operation. Would you split an unforeseen Cr. 100 up between them, and save all five, or would you use it to rescue Ruth?"

"Your way, they all die. Six altogether." Griffiths spoke bitterly. I wasn't getting through to him.

"Yes, but look at it from the point of view of the country as a whole," I continued determinedly. "Once, years ago, we used to have a problem. Only the rich could afford heart

transplants, and the rich were usually old, or they wouldn't need the operation. So they were able to spend Cr. 10,000 on an operation which prolonged their life say five years. That money would have paid for fifty kidney transplants and saved the lives of fifty young, useful people.

"This can't happen now, because nobody can get that rich, not since the Abolition of Personal Property Act of 2009. So now, nobody gets heart transplants. But very few die of diseased kidneys. Now wouldn't you say that the people, as a whole, have benefited from this?"

Griffiths seemed calmer now. "What you have told me is quite logical," he said slowly. "There's just one thing, though..."

"What's that?"

"Why don't you like the System?"

"But I do. I still say the System is the finest in the world."

And I was still saying it to myself six hours later, doggedly, as the mobile probe withdrew its drill and the voice of Ruth Villiers drifted up to us from the depths.

Yes, that was six months ago almost to the day. The story appeared in the *National Daily*, of course; it was too good to miss. The girl was different, however. The sad-eyed waif with beautiful, regular features who twisted the nation's heart-strings from the pages of the paper was a far cry from Griffith's lumpy girl-friend.

That's what brought the sightseers, of course. Even now, after all this time, those dismal, raincoated figures around the fence were imagining the girl of the press photograph down there, and thinking what a shame it was that a lovely girl like that should be wasted. And how they would like to rescue her, Lancelot-like, and take her away from the dreary pit, telling her it would be all right now and, soothing her with words and actions, carry her off to bed...

I wanted to shout at them, to shake them by the shoulders and yell into their avid faces: She's ugly! She's got a wart on the side of her nose and she stinks because she hasn't washed for six months! You understand that? Now! Does it make any difference?

Griffiths was emerging from the shed; he'd been bringing

her liquid food twice a day, spending all his spare time talking to her down the narrow, polythene-lined shaft.

He didn't speak much to me, now. He had become furtive, and would rarely tell me what they talked about over the hours. I don't know why I wanted to know: I think I had an almighty guilt complex about the whole affair and wished to share in it as much as possible, as though by so doing I might dilute the individual grief. . . .

Griffiths was hurrying towards me, scrambling up the pit side, fingers scrabbling in the shale. Something was wrong.

"Mr. Archer!"

I vaulted the fence and slid down towards him, skinning my hands on the loose rock in my haste. We met abruptly on the steep slope and clung together, breathless and tottering.

"What's the trouble?" I gasped.

"She won't speak. She's been bad, today, and now she won't speak to me. I heard her, she made a queer noise, but she wouldn't say anything!" His eyes were dilated with fear.

Seconds later I was standing in the gloom of the shed, calling down the tube which served Ruth Villiers for ventilation, communication and supplies.

"Ruth!"

I put my ear to the tube, listening hard. I could hear faint scuffling noises as though she was shifting about; but she didn't speak.

"Ruth!" I called again. "Are you all right?"

There was a sudden, complete silence from below. Griffiths was bending close to me, face averted and strained, trying himself to catch some faint sound from the tube. The interior of the shed smelled damp and musty, and on the table beside the stand which supported the tube was a half-empty milk bottle. The top quarter-inch of the milk had turned a viscous yellow and particles of sour solid adhered to the inside of the neck. A cup stood on the table also, stained in ochre ring below the rim and containing a brown puddle of old, cold tea.

Clear and distinct from the tube came the unmistakable cry of a new-born baby.

I've called for the breaking team and they should be here within the hour. I hope to have Ruth Villiers and the baby above ground in about six hours, so nobody can say that the Department doesn't move fast, when occasion demands.

Griffiths is beside himself with delight, crooning down the tube to his new daughter, planning the future—not forgetting the wedding—with Ruth. I wonder whether he knew of her condition, all along? Or whether she never told him, for fear that he would shirk any responsibility and clear out, leaving her completely alone? I don't know. There are depths to Griffiths that I will never be able to sound. But one thing I do know—and I can see it in his face now, as he talks down the tube—here is a man utterly in love, and with a girl at whom I myself would not look twice. It takes all sorts.

And just as well, too. The System may proclaim for the sake of economics that we are all basically equal but with individual capabilities of varying social value, but I wonder whether there aren't things—emotions, relationships, even love—which are incapable of being measured in terms of Credits.

Don't take me for a revolutionary. The last few hours have shown the System in an extremely good light, which I trust the *National Daily* will not be slow to publicise. My own faith, which I admit was shaken at one time, has been restored by the wonderfully logical way in which the System coped with the final sequence of events.

Because in that moment of birth in the underground cavern, one person became two: Ruth Villiers, with her virtually exhausted Social Credit Rating. . . .

And her daughter, with a Basic Individual Entitlement—Birthright—of Cr. 600. More than enough to hire a team of breakers.

Surely, now, nobody can criticise the System. Not even the *National Daily*.

Not even me.